

THE SECRET STAIRS

By ELLEN DOUGLAS DELAND

The Secret Stairs

Clyde Corners

The Waring Girls

Cyntra

Country Cousins

The Fortunes of Phoebe

The Girls of Dudley School

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SHE HASTENED DOWN THE STAIRS.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE NEWS IN NEW YORK	1
II. THE NEWS IN BAYPORT	17
III. THREE LETTERS	34
IV. ISABEL TAKES A JOURNEY	47
V. THE "JOKE" AT PROVIDENCE	60
VI. "IS YOUR NAME ISABEL RODNEY?"	72
VII. THE RODNEYS OF BAYPORT	85
VIII. "I'M PEGGY DUANE!"	99
IX. BROTHER AND SISTER	112
X. MARY CHISHOLM	128
XI. SUPPER AT THE CHISHOLMS—AND OTHER THINGS	141
XII. CINDERELLA, AND HER NEW ROOM	159
XIII. THANKSGIVING DAY AND THE C. F. T.	175
XIV. RATS!	190
XV. "WHERE IS ISABEL?"	204
XVI. ISABEL MAKES A PROMISE	220
XVII. MYSTERY	238
XVIII. PEGGY AND MARY TO THE RESCUE	254

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BY

ELLEN DOUGLAS DELAND

AUTHOR OF "CLYDE CORNERS," "THE WARING
GIRLS," "CYNTRA," "COUNTRY COUSINS," ETC.



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THE SECRET STAIRS

CHAPTER I

THE NEWS IN NEW YORK!

HER name was Isabel Rodney, and it was the day after her fourteenth birthday. She stood in one of the front windows on the second floor of a house over on the west side of New York, and wished with all her heart that she and her aunt were back in the small town in the West where she had lived the greater part of her life. She felt lonely. New York was so vast a place, and her aunt was the only person in the whole huge city whom she really knew. Of course, there were the people in this small hotel with whom they had become acquainted, but they could scarcely be said to count. Her aunt, Mrs. Todd, who was a widow with no children, had taken care of Isabel since she was little more than a baby, for both her father and her mother had died before the child was two years old, and she, therefore, looked upon her Aunt Clara as her only relative.

A month or so ago Mrs. Todd, for some myste-

THE SECRET STAIRS

rious reason which Isabel could not fathom, had sold her house in the West and had come to New York, for how long or short a stay Isabel did not know. She rather hoped it meant that she was to go to boarding school, although her aunt had not mentioned it. Indeed, she had been somewhat vague about everything. They would go to New York and would later make their plans. It seemed strange to Isabel, for they had no acquaintances there with the exception of a Spanish gentleman whom Mrs. Todd had met in San Francisco. He had recommended this small "family hotel," and here they were staying until Aunt Clara "could decide." Isabel, standing in the window and looking out that she might not see the dinginess of the room, wished that she would decide soon.

She longed to go to boarding school. She had heard about the life there, and she loved boarding-school stories. The girls in them were always getting into the most delightful scrapes, and getting out of them again by fascinating means. She could picture herself having precisely those thrilling adventures in the company of half a dozen congenial spirits of her own age. She longed for young friends. There was not a person of her own age or anywhere near it in this hateful hotel. All were elderly—twenty-five or thirty at the very youngest—and probably years and years older than that. If only she had a

THE NEWS IN NEW YORK!

sister, or a brother just a little older than herself! That would be best of all. Ever since she could remember she had wished that she had a brother a few years older and very jolly and kind. She knew it was a wish that could not possibly be realized, and so, of course, it was silly to wish it. She told herself this often enough, but still, if only——!

Opposite the window where she stood was a long row of brownstone houses, all with high flights of steps leading up to their front doors, all with little balconies outside the parlor windows, guarded by iron balustrades, one as like every other as peas in a pod. It was the middle of September, but the weather was warm. New York had the dusty, left-over aspect that cities wear in September. In the cracks and corners of the pavements were little heaps of dead leaves and bits of straw and paper, whirled there by an occasional gust of hot breeze. Immense numbers of English sparrows twittered and fluttered and fought in the ivy that grew over the houses. How she detested the city!

The sound of the opening and shutting of the door told her that her aunt had returned from her shopping expedition, and Isabel turned to greet her.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're back, Aunt Clara!" she exclaimed. "Did you have a horrid time? It must have been hot in the shops."

"Horrid time! My dear child, I've had a grand

THE SECRET STAIRS

time. Bargains! My, no end of 'em! My, how I do love a city life!"

Mrs. Todd, a rather handsome woman, still too youthful in appearance to be considered even middle-aged, except by her young niece, removed her large beflowered hat, and proceeded to exchange her high-heeled, white shoes for something more comfortable. She was given to the careful consideration of clothes, and was always dressed in public in what she thought was the latest style, but in the seclusion of her own apartment she liked to be "easy," as she called a pink silk kimono and slippers to match. The late Mr. Todd, a man much older than herself, had left her amply provided for, and since his death she had thoroughly enjoyed spending the fortune so painstakingly acquired by him, and of which she now had full control. She had a certain generosity of nature, in that she was always ready to buy for Isabel as well as for herself, so the girl had been brought up with all the pocket money that she needed.

The aunt and niece had traveled frequently, and by the persons whom they had happened to meet on these journeys Mrs. Todd was considered a wealthy and singularly unencumbered widow. She had a kindly and affectionate disposition, and she had always been good to the only child of her only sister, and Isabel felt for her a very real love, although she did not always agree with her.

THE NEWS IN NEW YORK!

"Oh, Aunt Clara!" she exclaimed; "how can you say you like the city? I just hate New York!"

"Now, isn't that funny? I was just opening my mouth to say, 'Give me a life in New York!' Well, my dear, so far as anybody can tell, we're each of us going to have what we like best—you for the country and me for the city! It's pretty much settled as far as I'm concerned, though, of course, 'there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip,' as the old saying has it, but I'm pretty sure it's all right for me, and I dare say it will be all right for you, for, of course, they can't refuse to take you after me supporting you all these years and giving you the best of everything, the way I have right along. You can never say I haven't treated you right—just like my own child, Bella. *N'est-ce pas, ma chérie?*"

Mrs. Todd was given to little foreign phrases in her conversation, and of late they had increased in frequency. She even attempted an occasional bit of Spanish. She sat in a rocking-chair and fanned herself vigorously with a small fan. It was evident to her niece that she was in a nervous although a cheerful frame of mind.

"Why, of course, you have always been lovely to me, Auntie Clara!" replied Isabel, slightly bewildered. She was accustomed to her aunt's voluble way of speaking, and yet she could not imagine what she meant by her last remark. Were they not to

THE SECRET STAIRS

stay together? Perhaps she was to be allowed to go to boarding school after all, and in the country somewhere, although her aunt had declared more than once that it would be out of the question because she herself could not be left alone. "Am I really to go to school? Oh, I do hope they will take me! Why shouldn't they? But I should hate to leave you all alone. Do you think I had better? Would you stay on here all by yourself, Auntie?"

"All by myself! I guess not!" exclaimed Mrs. Todd, rocking and fanning more vigorously than ever, and smiling broadly as she spoke. "Now, *chérie*, haven't you suspected anything at all? It seems as if you must have!"

A dull dread began to gather shape in Isabel's mind—a something which until now she had refused to recognize by thinking the matter out, although she had been conscious of its existence. Instinctively she knew what was coming, and yet she would not believe it until her aunt spoke the words.

"Suspected what?" she asked.

"That I'm going to marry again!" exclaimed Mrs. Todd, triumphantly. "I'm engaged, and I guess you know who to, all right!"

Isabel sat down. She felt suddenly quite limp and queer. Her whole world was tottering.

Her aunt watched her. She had wondered how the child would take it, and she was prepared for

THE NEWS IN NEW YORK!

trouble. She determined if possible to forestall it.

"See here," she began briskly, but not unkindly; "there's no use fussing over what can't be helped, is there? If you'd only used a little atom of common sense the last month you might have known it was coming. Why, he's been just perfectly devoted! You've seen that, haven't you, now?"

"I suppose you mean Mr. Zorolla," said her niece. Isabel's voice was clear and distinct. There was no mistaking the scornful utterance of the foreign name.

"Don Manuel y Zorolla of the Castle Zorolla, Spain!" corrected Mrs. Todd, superbly. "He is a marquis. I shall be making you the niece of a Spanish grandee."

To this announcement Isabel made no reply. She was not in the least impressed by it. She sat by the table in the center of the room, which was covered with a heavy rep tablecloth, and on which was a bowl of flowers, the grandee's gift of the day before. Isabel was filled with an immense desire to dash the bowl and all that it contained across the room. To avoid this drastic action she went back to the window at which she had been standing. There were the same brownstone steps opposite, the same iron balconies, the same English sparrows that had been there five minutes ago—and yet in those five minutes her whole world had changed. At last she

THE SECRET STAIRS

turned and faced her aunt, who was obviously waiting for her to say something.

"Of course, I hope you will be very happy, Aunt Clara," she faltered. "You—you like foreigners, so—so—perhaps you will be. I hope so, I'm sure."

"Well, I think it's about time for you to congratulate me! The idea! Such a queer girl as you are, Bella, it's a wonder we've got along together as well as we have, I'm sure! You can't say I haven't been good to you, can you, now?"

"Why, of course not, Aunt Clara! There is no one I would say it to, even if I thought it, which I don't, and never have. That is what makes me feel so badly—to know it's all over—that it won't ever be just you and me any more. Of course, I suppose Mr.—Don Manuel—will be kind to me when I come home for holidays, but it won't be just the same as it always has been, will it?"

"Come home for holidays? Why, what do you suppose you are going to do, child?"

"I thought—at least I hoped—you meant I was to go to boarding school somewhere. Didn't you?"

"Boarding school! Well, I never! If you ain't the limit, Bella, child!"

"Then am I to stay with you all the time? Am I to live with you?"

"Live with us? Not by a long shot! The Don

THE NEWS IN NEW YORK!

would never stand for that. No, indeed, Bella, my dear. Of course, you are to go to your father's relations."

"My father's relations!" repeated the girl slowly, "But—but they will not want me! You have told me that they didn't like Mamma. How can I go to them? Oh, Aunt Clara, surely you don't mean it? And I've never seen one of them!"

"I know you haven't, but it's high time you did, and I must say it has been my doings that you haven't. I told them when your father and mother both died and left you that little helpless baby that you were, that I'd take you if they would promise never to interfere, and they haven't. I will say that for them—they have kept to their part of the bargain, but things are going to be different now, and I guess they will take you, all right. I'm not a bit worried about that."

"How many are there?"

"Oh, lots of 'em, for all I know. An uncle, anyway. I know that for sure—unless he's died, and I never heard that he had. And two or three aunts, and—and—well, I suppose I've got to tell you, for you'll have to know it some time—you've got a brother, too."

Isabel could not speak. There was a strange feeling in her throat, and her mouth became parched and dry.

THE SECRET STAIRS

"For goodness' sake, child, don't take it so hard! I don't know how they'll treat you, but they certainly won't bite you! Here, take my fan. I guess this warm weather is affecting you."

But Isabel shook her head. "Did you say a brother?" she asked, in a voice quite unlike her own. "Why did you never tell me before that I had a brother? Oh, Aunt Clara!"

"For goodness' sake, Bella, don't take on so! He's only a half brother, anyway, and I thought it would unsettle you to know about him—you 'way off in Wyoming, and him in Massachusetts, and me not wanting anything to do with 'em after the nasty way they'd acted about your mother. Your father was twice married. He was a widower with one son when he married your mother, my own dear sister, and a sweeter woman never lived than my sister Isabel. I don't want you ever to forget that, Bella, nor allow anything different. And you're the living image of her. I declare, I think sometimes it's Isabel herself. You've got the same kind of blue eyes she had, kind of grayish blue, and set far apart, just like hers. And your nose is just like hers, too, sort of *retroussé*, but not a real turn-up. And you've got her kind of a temper, too, Bella! Awful quick, but soon over with. She never sulked or bore malice, and you don't either. I will say that for you. But set on having her own way, just as you are some-

THE NEWS IN NEW YORK!

times. And up to mischief, too! Oh, you're as like as two peas!"

Isabel had heard all this before. She sat very still, looking at her aunt. A brother—an uncle—aunts! Where were they? What were they like? Why had she never heard of that brother? It simply could not be true. Her Aunt Clara had invented this tale of the brother. She did exaggerate, and sometimes she fancied things to be entirely different from what Isabel knew them to be. She was excited about her coming marriage—but what if she had imagined that, too? Perhaps she was not really going to marry that man after all!

"I can't believe it," said Isabel slowly. "I can't believe a single word of any of it. Are you really and truly going to marry that Spanish man? Have I really and truly a brother?"

"Well, I never!" cried Mrs. Todd, indignantly. "If you don't beat everything, Isabel Rodney! Don't believe your own aunt! That's a pretty thing for you to say! Take it right back now before I get real mad. Do you suppose I'd make up such things? Answer me, quick!"

"Oh, no, I suppose not," said Isabel, sadly. It would have been too good to be true. This news only was the truth after all. "But why haven't you told me before about my brother?"

"Because I just didn't want to," proclaimed Mrs.

THE SECRET STAIRS

Todd. "I took you and brought you up. I told 'em, 'Hands off!' I said, 'If she's to stay with me, she's to be mine. I won't tell her about any of you till I get good and ready.' So we made a sort of a bargain, him and me. I mean your uncle, who came out West when your mother died, and offered to take you back home with him. You see they had the boy. They had taken him when his mother died, and the aunts thought the world and all of him, and were bringing him up like their own child, and I set out to do the same by you. When your father first met your mother he was a widower with this one child, but he left him with his own people when he came West, so your mother never had the care of him."

"Did he go out West and meet her there?" asked Isabel. She had always longed to know more about her parents, but until now had been unable to learn anything on the subject from her aunt, who had been strangely silent on a subject which to Isabel was of such importance.

"No," replied Mrs. Todd, rather reluctantly. "Your mother came East with some Eastern people, who took a fancy to her and engaged her for a governess to their children. They lived in the same place as the Rodneys, and it was there she came across Philip Rodney. As soon as they were married they came out and lived near us. His people were awfully down on your mother, because—well,

THE NEWS IN NEW YORK!

for reasons—pretty poor ones, I always thought. She had a right to do as she liked, and she was just sweet. I always thought my sister Isabel as pretty as a picture, and everybody who ever knew her loved her, except the Rodney family. But they were awful prejudiced. Eastern people all are, I'll tell you that, Bella! And set! My goodness, set ain't the word for it, especially New England people, and they're New England to their very backbone. Think no end of themselves, too. Awfully high and mighty. They live in Bayport, Massachusetts. I don't know much about the place, except a few things your mother let out now and then. I never could get her to talk much about it when she came back, but I should judge it to be a kind of a country town, so I guess you'll be living in the country, all right, just as you want to."

Mrs. Todd paused for a moment, but Isabel said nothing, and presently her aunt began again.

"Well, I said to your Uncle Rodney when he came out to my poor dear sister's funeral, s'I, 'I'll take the girl and bring her up, but I don't want any interference. I'm not going to tell her anything about you folks until I get good and ready—not until she's fifteen or thereabouts, for I don't want her getting unsettled. If she's mine, she's mine, and I mean to keep her to myself as far as relations are concerned. I'll tell her then, and I'll leave it written out in case

THE SECRET STAIRS

I die, and in that case Mr. Todd would attend to it if he's living, and I should die first.' Which, of course, he didn't, seeing he was a good ten years older than me. Well, your Uncle Rodney didn't like the idea a bit, for he had come out there with his mind all made up to take you back home with him—said his sisters would bring you up right, and they thought you and the boy ought to be brought up together, but when I remembered how they'd acted about your mother, my own precious sister, I just couldn't let you go to them, and I didn't. I kept you, and I've never regretted it, Bella, my dear, and I hope you'll put in a good word for me when they begin to criticize me, as they sure will. But now the time has come to make a change. Of course, I never dreamed I'd be a widow quite so early, and that I'd meet before long a real titled nobleman who'd fall in love with me and I'd become almost a princess. I declare, it's like a fairy tale. But you've never asked to see my ring! Ain't it a beauty? Did you ever see such a big diamond? My, don't it flash!"

She held out her hand, adorned with a stone which was certainly of great size, and the flash of which was dazzling. Isabel felt half blinded by it—or was it by the story which she had just heard? "It's very large and—and—grand!" she murmured, knowing that her aunt would be deeply offended if,

THE NEWS IN NEW YORK!

she did not express some admiration, but feeling no enthusiasm.

"Grand! I should say so! It's a family stone, a regular heirloom, and I'm to have other precious jewels. His family's almost royal. Of course, we shall live in the old family castle in Spain, but we're going to travel a lot, and live part of the time in Paris. I can tell you, I'm going to be no end of a swell, Bella! We're going over as soon as ever he gets through his business in this country, so you see I can't keep you with me, and it's a good thing you've got your father's folks to go to. It's all turning out all right, after all. Now, I'm going to write them a letter, and you can mail it this afternoon. Now it's all decided with the marquis, I feel as if I'd rather like to get everything else finished up and settled and out of the way. I'll sit right down and write to them now."

She seated herself at the table and after a brief period of thought her pen began to fly over the paper. It was a scratchy pen, and at intervals of a few minutes its progress ceased, while Mrs. Todd bit the end of it and considered what to say next. She signed her name at last with a flourish, sealed and stamped her letter, and handed it to Isabel.

"There, that's done!" she exclaimed, in a voice of relief. "Funny, how I've been dreading writing that letter, and it went as smooth as silk. Suppose

THE SECRET STAIRS

you take it out right now, Bella—you take it to the branch post office near here, and you get a special delivery stamp for it. It will get there sooner, and make those old ladies and the old gent realize there's something doing, and it's up to them to hurry. My, but I'm glad to get it off my mind!"

Isabel put on her hat, took the letter and left the room without a word. She wondered in a dull way, what her aunt had said, but she asked no questions. She had an odd feeling of remoteness, and of having no identity of her own. She was nothing more than the business that was being "finished up," but she was also a desolate and unhappy little girl. She told herself that she did not really care what her aunt had said to those old people in Bayport, for of what use would it be to care? She could do nothing to change the fate which hung over her. And so she had a brother! What kind of brother would he prove to be?

CHAPTER II

THE NEWS IN BAYPORT

THE Rodneys had always lived in Bayport. The annals of the old town showed that a Rodney had been one of the earliest colonists, and the name had figured as one of importance all the way down from the seventeenth century to the present day in its history. There had been ministers and merchants, a sea captain or two, one army officer in the Revolution, another in the Civil War. Even as late as 1880, Mr. Charles Rodney was driving the horse his father rode in '62, twenty years old to be sure, but still dancing and prancing at the sound of a band of music. Charles Rodney was a man of intellectual pursuits, professor of philosophy for a time in one of the smaller New England colleges, but now living at home, happy in his study, writing books too deep for his family to understand, but of which they were intensely proud.

Charles had not married, and his sister Abby presided over his house—so ably and completely, it was

THE SECRET STAIRS

said by the Bayport wags, that he had lacked the courage to make a change. Be that as it may, the sisters, Abby, Phœbe and Lydia, with their nephew Philip, lived in the Professor's house, on a somewhat limited income to be sure, but in more than the average state of comfort and contentment.

Philip was the son of the brother who had died some twelve years ago, and he was the half brother of Isabel. This boy, who was now seventeen and who had known no other home, was not ignorant of his sister's existence as she had been of his. On the contrary, he had more than once expressed a wish to "see the kid," and had declared that some day, in spite of family promises of "hands off," he intended to "look her up." This idea had never met with the approval of his elder relatives, but Aunt Lyd, who was the youngest of his aunts and quite modern in her way of thinking, considered it natural and praiseworthy on Philip's part, and promised to go with him when the time came. It was safe to say this, for Phil must finish school and go through college before he could set forth on his travels to find his unknown sister.

The family came down to breakfast one warm September morning, quite unconscious that a bomb, metaphorically speaking, was to explode in their midst unexpectedly before they rose from the table; but it is the way of bombs to surprise people.

THE NEWS IN BAYPORT

It was a beautiful room, with wainscoting and landscape paper, and high-backed mahogany chairs, and a big table about which had gathered in the past the Rodneys whose portraits hung upon the walls. The ancient family silver gleamed on the huge sideboard in the sunshine which came through the eastern windows. Outside was the garden, still blooming with late hollyhocks and phlox. Everything both within and without the house was neat and orderly, and precisely as it had always been. Miss Abby poured the coffee as usual, making each cup to suit the person for whom it was intended with her customary care, and breakfast for Miss Phœbe, the invalid, was arranged on a dainty tray. The Professor glanced at the headlines of the morning paper, knocked his glasses from his nose with his daily remark of disgust at the state of the world, and then very cheerfully attacked his johnny-cake, made by the old Rodney rule. His sister Lydia picked up the paper as he laid it down, and considered the first page while she stirred her coffee, and then Philip drifted in, as usual a little late, and took his place opposite to his Aunt Lyd.

“Hullo, everybody!” said he. “I won’t be home to-night, Aunt Abby. Lucky I remembered to tell you. You would have sat up till all hours, wouldn’t you?”

He was a good-looking youth, tall and well-made,

THE SECRET STAIRS

with straight features and honest eyes. His hair, a dark chestnut, grew thick above his forehead and his brows were strongly marked. He ruled his Aunt Lyd with a rod of iron, of which fact they were both perfectly aware; but Aunt Abby was different. She also could wield the iron rod when necessity demanded its use, but even she looked with an easy tolerance on Philip and his ways, especially when he smiled at her as he was doing now.

"It is fortunate you told me," she said. "By eleven o'clock to-night I should have been telephoning all about for a little lost boy. Where is it this time, Philip?"

"New London for the week-end with Jimmy Curtis, and longer if we're sufficiently urged. Lots doing there, and you know it will be our last fling before school begins, except the Duanes' roof-garden party, which will be on Thursday night, a dinner and some sort of a show afterwards, so I won't get home till late if we stay until Thursday. Not before midnight, so don't think I'm burglars, and don't wait up for me, will you, Auntie? But it's New London to-day. Old Curtis lives there, Jimmy's uncle, you know, and he is going to put us up."

"I suppose I am 'Old Rodney' to Jimmy and all the other Bayport boys," put in his uncle Charles, with his grave face and his humorous eyes.

THE NEWS IN BAYPORT

"Right you are, sir!" his nephew agreed promptly; "when you're not 'the good old Prof.' "

The two exchanged an affectionate and understanding glance, and continued to eat breakfast. And then the door bell rang.

"A special delivery letter," said the maid, as she entered the dining room. "Please sign it here." She handed the slip to the Professor and he wrote his name in the designated blank space. He glanced at the address and the postmark, and in his leisurely and methodical fashion slit the envelope with a table knife. "From New York," he said. "Whom do I know in New York who would be in such a hurry?"

"All New York is in a hurry," replied Miss Abby austere.

"Very true. An amazing place—a truly amazing place. I thought when I was last there——"

"My dear Charles, had you not better read your letter?" Miss Abby was impatient if he was not. He did not often receive special delivery letters. It must be of importance. Perhaps the offer of a professorship at Columbia—a nice berth in the Rockefeller Foundation—though, of course, they could never leave Bayport! But if he would only open it!

And at last he drew from the envelope several sheets of note paper covered with large, sprawly handwriting. He settled his glasses more firmly on his nose and turned to the signature. He uttered an

THE SECRET STAIRS

exclamation which for him was emphatic, and caused his nephew to grin broadly. He glanced over the first page and passed quickly to the next. He laid the sheets down, removed his glasses, stared into space, put them on again and read the letter through once more from beginning to end; and all this time his sisters waited. At last Lydia could endure it no longer.

"What in the world is it, Charles?" she demanded. "You look as if at any minute you would have a fit."

"Lydia!" said her sister, shocked, but on the whole sympathetic. "You are using very exaggerated language. Is it anything, Charles, in which we would be interested?"

"Interested! I should say so! Humph! Undoubtedly you will be deeply interested. It's from—that woman!"

"What woman, my dear Charles?" Miss Abby's perturbation was plainly visible. Philip roared with laughter, and Lydia gave a little half-suppressed chuckle.

"Philip's sister-in-law."

It was now his nephew's turn to look astonished. "My sister-in-law?" he murmured. "Uncle Charles, have you gone daffy? Didn't know I owned the article!"

"Oh, I mean your father, of course—my brother

THE NEWS IN BAYPORT

Philip. Abby, she is going to marry again and she wants us to take the child!"

For a minute or two there was profound silence. Philip was the first to break it.

"Well, I should think it was about time," he said. "The idea of my never having seen my own sister!"

"It has not been in any way our fault, Philip," said his aunt Abby, severely. "The woman made that strict condition. We offered to bring up the girl—your uncle, your aunts and I. We were ready to take her and treat her precisely as we have treated you, and she refused. She said she should adopt Isabel and bring her up as her own child if we would promise never to interfere or make ourselves known. If we would not promise this she would have nothing more to do with the child. Isabel was little more than a baby, and this was her mother's only sister. Except for the conditions, it was a natural arrangement, as we had the care of you. We did not like it, but we had to agree. And now what is happening, Charles? You say the woman is going to marry again? She is going to cast the child off?"

"She doesn't say it in so many words, but that is what it amounts to. Here, read the letter!"

"I—I haven't my glasses," said Miss Abby. She was much agitated beneath her calm exterior. "Lydia, you read it aloud."

So Lydia took the letter and read as follows:

THE SECRET STAIRS

"MY DEAR MR. RODNEY:

"It is many a year since I communicated with you, and I assure you I would not be doing it now except for something very important. I have decided not to keep my niece Isabel any longer as per former arrangements. She is as dear a girl as ever lived, as like her mother as two peas, and has never given me a mite of trouble. I'm as fond of her as I ever was, but times have changed, for when I offered to take her and make her my own child, my first husband, Mr. Todd, was alive and well, and he was willing I should. Since then he has died and after mourning him five years steady I have decided to marry again. My engagement has just been announced, you will see it in tomorrow's New York papers. I expect very soon, in fact, in about a month from now, to become the bride of Don Manuel y Zorolla, of Spain! As we shall be starting very soon after the wedding for my husband's castle in Spain, it stands to reason I can't keep Isabel by me any longer. Of course, it is not to be expected the marquis would take her to Spain. Of course, any one at all acquainted with noblemen knows that marquises and dukes and earls and all such titled people have a great many duties and responsibilities and can't be expected to look after

THE NEWS IN BAYPORT

their wives' relations. I'm real sorry about it, for I'm real fond of the child, but I know you will be glad to have her come. You wanted her before so I feel all right about asking you to take her now and I'm very thankful she will have a good home. I've only just told her about it and that she has a brother which she hadn't the least idea of, and, of course, she is feeling a bit upset. I never thought best to tell her before about a brother. By the way, I never adopted her legally as I said I was going to but I've always treated her as my own child even without that. She has been *very* happy with me and she's had plenty of money and everything she wanted. Kindly let me know if she can go to you immediately after the ceremony about a month from now. You will all get cards being in the family, though it is going to be quiet. Of course, Isabel will be my bridesmaid but it will be street dress so she can go back with you right afterward. With kind regards to all the family, cordially yours,

"CLARA OWEN TODD."

Philip was the first to break the silence which descended upon the group at the breakfast table when Lydia laid down the letter.

"Great Scott!" was all that he said, very slowly.

THE SECRET STAIRS

Miss Abby, who had long since ceased to eat, leaned back in her chair. Miss Lydia carefully replaced the sheets in their envelope and returned the letter to her brother. He also leaned back in his chair.

"I have always felt," said he at last, "that our niece's aunt on her mother's side was liable to do something unexpected. I have felt certain that sooner or later we should be called upon. I have very vivid recollections of the one occasion of our meeting. A very different woman from—from the child's mother."

Lydia glanced at her sister and hurriedly intervened. She knew what would come if she did not, and it did not seem worth while to discuss now their late sister-in-law, who had gone out of their lives thirteen years ago.

"What a preposterous letter!" she exclaimed. "What a creature! Ready to hand the child over to us like a bundle of clothing, after almost keeping our very existence a secret! Do you notice she said Isabel was upset over hearing she was to come to us, and that she had a brother? I don't wonder she was. And going to marry a Spanish marquis and have a castle in Spain! It will be like other castles in Spain, I haven't the least doubt. Of course, she is being taken in, and I hope she is. It will serve her right. He is after her money."

THE NEWS IN BAYPORT

"No doubt about that," agreed her sister, successfully turned for the present at least from the subject of Isabel's mother. "I have never felt comfortable about that child's fate. She is a Rodney, and our niece. I always have felt that we were not living up to our family traditions in not having any part in her education, but we were bound hand and foot. I am thankful we are to have an opportunity before it is too late. Let me see! Isabel is now about fourteen, I think. I hope she is still young enough for proper training."

Philip laughed rather harshly. "She'll get it all right. I'm sorry for the kid, tossed about just as Aunt Lyd says, like a bundle of old clothes. I'm sorry she's upset about me, though. Why should she be?"

"Probably the lady 'as is to be' of the Spanish nobility made that up, Phil," said Miss Lydia.

"Well, it's not worrying me much," rejoined her nephew. "I'll be off to school by the time she gets here, if she is not coming for a month, so she will be able to get used to the idea. I suppose we'll all go on to the wedding," he added wickedly, "being the 'family.'"

"Go to the wedding!" exclaimed Miss Abby, who was sometimes very literal. "I would sooner——"

"Sh! Sh! Auntie! Don't say it, dear!"

THE SECRET STAIRS

It was so exactly Miss Rodney's manner when she wished to restrain Philip's occasional strong language that they all laughed, even Miss Abby herself.

"It is not often that we Rodneys are invited to the wedding of a nobleman, Spanish or otherwise," continued he. "Better make the most of our only opportunity. Well, I'm off now to pack my kit, and I'll be home sometime next week. So long, everybody! I'm glad the kid's coming, if I don't have to go and fetch her. I'm not used to dukes and marquises, to say nothing of Spanish dons, and I shouldn't know how to treat them. I suppose you'll attend to all that, Uncle Charles. Got a frock coat? Your old one is too shiny for such an occasion as that." With another laugh he left the room and they heard him running upstairs three steps at a time. He came down again very shortly with his suitcase, looked up his tennis racket, and, laden with luggage, dashed out the back door and across the garden. By the gate which opened into the next garden, he reached by a short cut the Duanes' house, which was next door to the Rodneys'. The Duanes were also at breakfast, and while the room in which they were eating was similar to the Rodneys' dining room, the family gathered there was in every way different. There were five boys and girls, all talking at once, and there were Mr. and Mrs. Duane,

THE NEWS IN BAYPORT

who were Philip's uncle and aunt, for his mother had been a Duane.

"Hullo, everybody!" said Phil, appearing in the doorway. "I'm off, and I'll be back for the party Thursday, Pegs, even if I don't get to Boston till just in time for it."

"Now be sure you do, Phil," said a girl of about fourteen. "I'll be furious if you don't!"

"Oh, why worry?" remarked her brother Ned, who was older than Phil and already at Harvard. "He wouldn't miss it. The great and only Anne is coming, isn't she?" His air of condescension was superb.

"You shut up!" said Philip, with what the girls called "his heavenly grin." "So long, everybody! Oh, by the way, we've had some news over at our house this morning," he added, thrusting his head inside the dining room again. He had turned to leave the house.

"News, at this hour?" said his aunt. "Surely it isn't time for the postman yet?"

"Special news, special delivery," replied Philip. "It's just that my kid sister from the wild and woolly West is coming home to live. About time, I say! By-by!"

Meantime in at the Rodneys' after Philip had left, Miss Abby sat still, thinking profoundly. At last she took up her fork and finished her break-

THE SECRET STAIRS

fast. Then she pushed back her chair. "Of course, you will answer the letter at once, Charles?" She put it in the form of a question, but her brother knew it to be a command.

"Of course—certainly!"

"And what will you say?"

"Oh, I shall say—well, what had I better say?" He was wondering if Abby would think he must go to the wedding.

"I should say, if I were you, that we are greatly surprised that she is giving up the child, but we are willing and glad to have her come to us, and we are as ready now as we were years ago to have her here. Make that very clear, Charles. Of course, you must use your own judgment about going to the wedding. Wild horses would not drag me there, and I should be surprised if Lydia either would go, and, of course, for poor Phœbe it is out of the question. She is a common, vulgar person—that aunt, I mean."

"Charles didn't think you meant Phœbe, Abby, I feel sure," put in Lydia demurely.

"A common, vulgar person," repeated her sister, paying no attention to Lydia's levity. "I suppose the child has been brought up differently from any other Rodney. I am prepared for the worst. But about the letter. You must, of course, tell her just what you think best, but I should think you would

THE NEWS IN BAYPORT

say you would *call* for Isabel immediately *after* the ceremony. Then you can take her quickly away and take the first train for Boston that you can get. That would be *my* idea."

"Very good. Very good," said Charles. "I will do just as you say, Abby. And now I have a suggestion to make. Would it not be well for you girls to write to Isabel, too?" To the Professor his sisters were always "the girls."

"Most assuredly! I will write to her at once, and I am sure Lydia will, but I doubt if Phœbe is able. I am dreading the effect this news may have upon Phœbe. She seemed very nervous when I stopped in her room this morning. And we will be all ready to welcome Isabel as our own niece, who, no doubt, in spite of everything, will become almost as dear to us as if she had been with us since the very first. Of course, she can never be to us quite what Philip is. That is not to be expected. Philip has great charm, and part of it he inherits from his mother's family. The Duanes have always been—well, the Duanes! Of course, Isabel must always bear the incubus of her mother's lack of——"

"Which room shall she have?" interrupted Lydia, daringly. Poor Charles had stood enough for one morning, and she would try once more to stem the tide of Abby's disapproval of Isabel's mother.

"I was coming to that presently," said her sister.

THE SECRET STAIRS

"Lydia, you are the most impatient creature! I think the southeastern chamber would do nicely. We really don't need it for a spare room, for we have very few visitors, and Philip would probably prefer to keep the third floor to himself. Yes, the southeast chamber shall be Isabel's."

"It will be fun to fix it up for her," said Lydia. "We must try to make it young and fresh. Abby, I wish you would let me do the whole thing! I should love to, and you attend to so much in the house."

"I am quite willing you should if you will promise not to make any radical changes," her sister said mildly. "Let us go up now and look at it, and also tell Phœbe. We will do what we can to make the child happy and comfortable. I do hope she hasn't been brought up with very extravagant ideas. Perhaps, Charles," she added, as she reached the dining room door, "you will allow me to read your letter before you send it?"

"Certainly, Abby, certainly!"

They left him to finish his breakfast and went upstairs, Miss Abby slowly, for she was growing stouter each year, but Miss Lydia was still brisk and youthful. They were not in the least alike, these two sisters, and Abby being the eldest and Lydia the youngest of a family of nine children, there was considerable difference in their ages. Lydia was looked upon by her sister as a mere child still, and

THE NEWS IN BAYPORT

Lydia had reached the age when she did not object in the least.

"I am glad some one still thinks I am young," she remarked humorously to her friends. "You don't, I know only too well! One never can deceive one's contemporaries."

The sisters entered the guest room, and gave a hasty glance around. "Yes, you can take charge of this, Lydia," said her sister. "I know I shall have enough to do, keeping up Charles. Oh, Lydia, how is he going through with it?"

"Perfectly well, I should say," replied Lydia composedly. "Now, Abby, don't worry! Charles got over it years ago. You had better forget the past, too, now that Isabel is coming."

"I never can forget the past. Isabel may be our niece, but she is also, and always will be, Isabel's daughter."

"I'm going to begin to get ready for her this very day," said Lydia, with determination. "I long to get her here, our niece Isabel, and now hadn't we better tell Phœbe? She always feels better after breakfast. It is a good time."

CHAPTER III

THREE LETTERS

MEANTIME, in the "family hotel" in New York, life became at the same time more exciting and also more depressing. Mrs. Todd declared that she was "all in a whirl," and, although Isabel knew herself to be only an onlooker, she was also drawn into the eddy. There was endless shopping. Don Manuel called often, coming sometimes in a handsome motor car to take Mrs. Todd on some delightful expedition. Though Isabel was exceedingly lonely, she was glad not to be included in his invitations. She disliked him so intensely that she could scarcely greet him politely. This was, of course, perfectly evident to the Spaniard, and he responded to it by, in turn, disliking her. He was a small man with a swarthy skin, a huge black mustache, and black hair and eyes; and he spoke English with a strong foreign accent.

Mrs. Todd frequently assured Isabel that the marquis was charming, and that it was only her

THREE LETTERS

peculiar nature that prevented her from admiring her future uncle. "For you don't like him, Isabel, one little bit! It's as plain as the nose on your face, and I can't for the life of me see why you don't—and Don Manuel has noticed it. He said only yesterday, s'd he, 'She don't like me, does she?' Of course I tried to turn it off. I said, s'I, 'Oh, she's only a bit jealous, that's all. She's awful fond of me and it's only natural she should be a bit jealous. It'll pass off all right when she gets used to the thought of me marrying again.' But it's not like you, Isabel child, and I don't know what to make of it. Of course, I feel bad myself about giving you up entirely, but those things have to happen. It isn't as bad as if I was to die and leave you that way, is it now? Come now, you cheer up and make the best of things."

She said it kindly and Isabel was touched, for she loved her aunt. She promised that she would try to be more cheerful, and would also be more cordial to her future uncle, but in her heart she longed for the time to come when she could bid them both good-by and start upon her journey in search of her other relatives and her new home in New England. But suppose they refused to receive her there! No reply had come from them as yet. To be sure, it was now only the third day since Mrs. Todd's letter was posted, but Isabel had secretly been hoping

THE SECRET STAIRS

that they would answer by telegraph, or at least by special delivery, and no word of any kind had been received. It could only mean that they did not want her, and were now engaged in making plans to dispose of her in some other way than that of receiving her into the family!

Left alone in the cheerless hotel sitting room this warm September afternoon, Isabel Rodney decided that she was an unhappy girl. Nobody wanted her, she had no father or mother like most other girls, she was not yet old enough to earn her own living as she would like to do, she had no home, and although she possessed a brother—that wonderful, desirable, much-to-be-adored relative, a brother—he would probably turn out to be worse than no brother at all, for he had never made himself known to her, and, therefore, she was quite sure that she should not like him. She pitied herself so much that she began to cry. There seemed really to be nothing else to do.

At last she dried her eyes and decided to go out. It was a pleasant afternoon, although it was warm, and one of the parks would be a better place than this dingy, airless room. Her aunt had announced that she probably would not return before seven o'clock, and it would be impossible to sit there doing nothing all those hours. She put on her hat and went down the stairs. As she passed the office on

THREE LETTERS

her way to the door she asked, as usual, if there were any letters. To her surprise the clerk produced three. One was for her aunt, and the other two were addressed to herself. All bore the postmark, "Bayport, Mass." She seized them from the clerk and turning, dashed upstairs again.

"Gee! Some hurry!" said he, looking after her, but she did not stop to reply. The answer, the only thing that mattered, was contained in those three envelopes. One, of course, must not be opened now, but the others were hers. She tore them out of their covering, first one and then the other, before reading either. She glanced at the signatures. "Your affectionate aunt, Abby Rodney." "Most lovingly yours, Aunt Lyd." She smiled with satisfaction. Perhaps they were going to welcome her to their home after all, and the thought gave her sufficient courage at last to read the letters. She closed her eyes, shuffled the sheets about, and chose the uppermost. She liked doing this sort of thing. It made life more interesting. She found that her aunt Abby's was at the top, and this is what it said:

"MY DEAR NIECE ISABEL:

"My brother, your uncle Charles, received to-day the surprising but agreeable news that you would now be at liberty to make the acquaintance of your father's family. We shall

THE SECRET STAIRS

be glad to welcome you to our house, which will henceforth be your home. Four generations of Rodneys have lived in this house, but you have never entered its doors! I trust you will be happy here. Your room will be ready whenever you can come. I understand that this will not be for another month, but if you should wish to come sooner you will be made welcome. I only ask that you let me know a day or two in advance. Please be sure to do this.

“Your affectionate aunt,
“ABBY RODNEY.”

Isabel sat still for a minute or two after reading this. “What a funny old lady my aunt Abby must be,” she thought. “I’m afraid she is very, very old, the letter is so precise. And, of course, if she is, my uncle and the other aunts must be, too, for they would all be about the same age, ever and ever so much older than Aunt Clara! Of course, there’s my brother. He’s young, but I’m not going to like him. That’s certain sure.”

Then she read the letter of her other aunt:

“DEAREST ISABEL:

“We are all delighted that you are coming to live with us. My dear child, I have simply ached to know you! It has seemed very sad

THREE LETTERS

and dreadful never even to have seen our only niece, and I am thankful the time has come for us to meet and know you at last. It seems too good to be true that you are actually going to live with us. As Phil would say, 'It's great!' It will be lovely for Phil to have a sister. You will love Phil. Every one does, and I hope, dear, that you will soon love us *all*. Aunt Phœbe sends her love. She is such an invalid that she does not write many letters, but she sends you many affectionate messages.

"Most lovingly,

"YOUR AUNT LYD."

"What a nice, friendly aunt she must be!" thought Isabel. "Why, she doesn't sound old at all! Oh, I wish I were going sooner!" She read her Aunt Lydia's letter through a second time. "She says she knows I will love Philip, but I am quite sure I'm not going to. I do think he might have written or something. He hasn't even sent me a message, like Aunt Phœbe, who seems to be ill. He probably hates the idea of my coming."

But even this fancy did not prevent her from looking forward to life in Bayport with a large amount of pleasant anticipation. She wondered what the place was like. From what her Aunt Clara had said, she supposed it to be a sort of country town.

THE SECRET STAIRS

She decided to go to the public library to look at a map of Massachusetts and find out exactly where Bayport was. There were many maps there, some so large that probably the little country town might be found on one of them. It gave her an object for her walk, and she hurried downstairs again feeling much happier than when she went over the same stairs so short a time ago.

She had no difficulty in finding Bayport on the map, and was pleased, too, when she discovered it to be on the seacoast. She had never seen the Atlantic Ocean until she came to New York, although she had visited the Pacific. She discovered also that Bayport was not far from Boston. She became more and more interested in the thought of going there, and after leaving the library she walked in the direction of the Grand Central Station, for she knew that trains for Boston went from that station. Not knowing what else to do—it was so stupid, she thought, to have no girl friends with whom to spend the afternoon and talk things over—she entered the big waiting-room, and seeing the sign "Information," she decided to ask if the Bayport trains went from there as well as the Boston trains. After standing in line for some time she finally reached the window, and was told that she must go to Boston, cross the city, and take another train from another station for Bayport. It sounded intricate, and Isabel hoped

THREE LETTERS

that she would not be obliged to make the journey alone. Nothing had been said in her aunts' letters as to how she should get there. She supposed they would send Philip to fetch her. That would be most disagreeable. She simply could not endure taking a long journey with a brother who did not want her to come. No; if Philip was suggested as an escort she would find some way of getting there without him, although she did not know now how it could be accomplished.

And when, after hours of waiting on the part of her niece, Mrs. Todd returned and the third letter was at last opened, it contained a suggestion of that very possibility. It was from Uncle Charles Rodney, and while it was more formal in tone than those of his sisters to Isabel, it was cordial and pleasant. He wrote that he was glad his brother's daughter was now to make her home with them, and he would come to New York for her, or he *would send Philip!*

To Isabel, eagerly drinking in every word of the letter, this seemed too much to be endured. She said nothing, but her thoughts were busy. So Philip would have to be sent, would he? No message from him, no letter, nothing but the chilling information that he was probably to be sent to fetch her! It was true, then, that he did not want her. Very well! Brother and sister though they might be, if he did not want her, neither would she want him. She had

THE SECRET STAIRS

lived fourteen years without even knowing that she had a brother, so it would be easy enough to do without caring for him. Who could be expected, she said to herself, to love a brother one did not know? To be sure there was something in the Bible about being like a murderer if you hated your brother. She, of course, did not hate him, but she did not love him, and what was more, she never would love him. That was settled. As to traveling with him all the way, from New York to Bayport, it was impossible. She would avoid it in some way, though she did not then know how. She could think it out later, but one thing was sure. Her companion on the trip should not be her brother Philip.

In the meantime Mrs. Todd was describing her delightful afternoon, while she made herself ready for dinner.

"I'm thankful those letters have come," she said, "for now I've got you off my mind. You'll be well taken care of, Bella, and I'll have no need to worry. Don Manuel will be relieved, too. I could see from what he said to-day he was getting kind of anxious. He said there wasn't a kinder-hearted man than him and it's the truth, but he put it most beautifully. I do love his foreign accent—the way he rolls his r's is just fascinating—but he said that with his cares and his large estates and everything, and his own relations over there in Spain, he just couldn't undertake

THREE LETTERS

another niece, and I don't blame him, especially as your father's folks are evidently perfectly willing to have you. Of course, I've known all along they wanted you, Bella, and that's just why I knew from the first I'd better be firm and just put a stop to all intercourse. I knew I'd have an awful time, with you getting unsettled and all, if I allowed you to come East and visit them. But everything's changed now that dear Don Manuel has come into my life, and I'm glad enough you have a good home to go to. There, I'm ready now, I believe, and we'll go down to dinner. He's not coming this evening, so we'll go to bed early to get rested for to-morrow. He's planning a wonderful trip for to-morrow, 'way down on Long Island."

"Are you going off again to-morrow, Aunt Clara?" asked Isabel. "Am I to be alone all day?"

"Why, yes, but, of course, you don't mind! I'll leave you some money to buy yourself some little things, Bella. You can't ever say I haven't given you plenty of money, child, can you?"

Isabel made no reply. What should she do with a long day of loneliness? What was money? As she had never known the lack of it, she did not realize its value.

"I'm real glad," continued Mrs. Todd, "that they're willing to take you sooner if necessary. I wrote Charles Rodney, you know, that the wedding

THE SECRET STAIRS

would be in a month, but Don Manuel's begun to talk about it being sooner. He says he wants to get to Spain as soon as possible. Nothing's been decided yet, and I'm in no hurry, for I do want to get a good *trousseau*. The only thing is, I might run up to Paris very soon and get all I need. We'll be taking trips to Paris and Monte Carlo and everywhere all the time, he says. My, but I'm going to have a grand life, Bella! I should think you'd feel happier when you think of it, instead of acting so glum all the time. You're a regular wet blanket. Come now, do cheer up a bit. That lady on the floor above, Mrs. Grant, is real friendly. You could sit with her a while if you get lonely. She asked us to come to her room. And you'll have plenty to do, anyhow. When you go out to-morrow you just go to the shops and see what they've got in ready-made dresses that would do for you to be bridesmaid in, and then travel to Bayport in. Something nice and stylish, you know, that will do for a fall suit. And a hat, too. You've got awful good taste, Bella; just as good as mine. Have something sent home on approval if you like, though I don't know whether they'd want to do that, as we're strangers here. I tell you, get a hat if you see one you like, and just look at suits and choose one, and ask 'em to hold it twenty-four hours, and we'll go next day and pay for it. There is no doubt in my mind that the mar-

THREE LETTERS

quis will be for hurrying things up quite a bit, and we'd better be ready. It means an awful lot of work and rush for me, but I guess I can do it. And as soon as I know myself, I'll let the Rodneys know, and your uncle or your brother can come right on to the wedding and get you. Most likely it will be your brother, and natural it should be. Your uncle is getting on in years. I dare say he and the oldest sister are both quite old and decrepit by now. Of course, they'll have the young fellow come after you. I *hope* so, I'm sure. I don't feel as if I could stand seeing Charles Rodney again after all we went through."

She did not say what they "went through," nor when, and Isabel did not ask her. She knew that there was some mystery connected with her mother's marriage, something that Aunt Clara had never been willing to explain. With the natural curiosity of a child she had asked questions, but the replies had not been satisfactory. Her aunt had always made an evasive answer. Something had happened, Isabel was perfectly sure, and it was for that reason that she had never had any intercourse with her eastern relatives. She wondered if they would tell her about it, but how could they tell her that they did not like her mother? For her Aunt Clara had once said something of that kind. Years ago when Isabel was only eight or nine years old she had said:

THE SECRET STAIRS

"They're queer people, those relations of yours, Bella, and don't you forget it. They couldn't bear my sister Isabel, your own precious mother. They treated her—well, I wouldn't like to say to you just what I think of the way they treated her, but don't you forget it!"

The child had not forgotten. She was intensely loyal to the memory of the mother whom she had never seen—the beautiful mother whose picture she carried with her wherever she went—but she had never asked any more questions of her aunt. A certain innate loyalty to her father's family, of which she herself was perhaps unconscious, made her unwilling to hear about them from so prejudiced a person as her mother's sister. Of course, they were probably very disagreeable people, those Rodneys, she had thought until now, but she did not wish to hear her aunt say so.

And now these three letters just received made her suspect that possibly they were not so unkind as she had supposed. Perhaps Aunt Clara had been mistaken! It would not be the first time that Auntie had thought people to be better or worse than they had afterward turned out to be. It had happened more than once in the course of Isabel's short life.

CHAPTER IV

ISABEL TAKES A JOURNEY

THERE was no further conversation between Isabel and her aunt that night, for the friendly Mrs. Grant from the floor above came to spend the evening with Mrs. Todd. Isabel went to bed early, and left the two ladies together; but from the next room, although the folding doors between were closed, she could hear plainly all that they said. She was rather sleepy when she bade them good-night, but presently she became wide-awake, for her aunt, never averse to the discussion of her private affairs even with strangers, was soon pouring out her plans and her perplexities to her new friend.

“We’re going to fix the day to-morrow,” said Mrs. Todd, “and I’m pretty sure the wedding will be inside of a fortnight. He’s in an awful hurry, and being a nobleman he’s used to having his own way in everything. My, but he’s a masterful man! He just sweeps you right along. . . . Yes, I’m sorry about her, of course. . . . Yes, I brought her up,

THE SECRET STAIRS

just like a mother, and she's going to miss me badly, but it isn't as though I was leaving her with no place to go to. Her father's folks are all ready to take her. They wanted her before, but I wouldn't listen to it. Her brother will be the one to come and get her, I feel pretty sure. They're very swell people from the neighborhood of Boston. Regular high-brows, you know; the Rodneys of Bayport. You'll see the brother, for he'll be at the wedding. . . . No, he's no relation to me. The father was married twice and the second wife, you see, was the one who was my sister. This young Philip Rodney is half brother to my Bella, and it will be him who'll come for her, you mark my words."

And Isabel, lying in the dark in the adjoining room, believed her to be right. She wanted to cry, but the necessity for thinking kept her from doing so. A mad, a daring idea had entered her mind. She would not be called for and taken to her new home by her brother Philip, just like a bundle of clothes, she thought, not knowing that she was using the very simile which had occurred to her relatives in Bayport. And there was only one way to avoid it. She must get there before he should have time to start. She would go alone. And the only way to accomplish this was to run away! The very words, "run away," appealed to her. She sat up in bed and softly clapped her hands. What fun it

ISABEL TAKES A JOURNEY

would be! To escape the wedding, never again to see the odious Spaniard, and above all, "to get ahead of Philip!" She determined to keep a careful watch, and at the first definite word of the date fixed for the wedding she would quietly pack her belongings and go. She had traveled enough to know just what to do, and, provided that she had enough money for the trip, there would be no trouble whatever. That would be her sole difficulty.

It was long before she fell asleep, and when she awoke the next morning the same thought persisted, but more clearly and definitely than had been the case the night before. She must seize the first opportunity that presented itself to run away. There were three things that must be considered in order to do it successfully: she must choose a day when her aunt was to be absent for several hours; she must have enough money; and she must start before her brother should have time to come to New York to fetch her. Oh, if only she could leave to-day!

To-day? She sat up in bed and looked across the room at her aunt. Mrs. Todd was still asleep. Isabel crept cautiously to the window, and peered out. It was a fine, clear morning, and Aunt Clara would surely make the trip to Long Beach, down on Long Island. She had said she would be gone all day. Only the third possible difficulty remained—that of money, and that would not be settled until her aunt

THE SECRET STAIRS

left her. She might or might not give her enough for her to buy the bridesmaid's hat, and it might or might not be enough for the fare to Bayport. Isabel had a small amount in her purse. She was glad that she had bought nothing, not even an ice-cream soda, when she was out the afternoon before. Every penny saved would count now.

It was seven o'clock, and she felt that it would be impossible to stay longer in bed, so she began quietly to dress. She was in a fever of suspense. She would, of course, be obliged to wait until Mrs. Todd was out of the house before she could do any packing, and even then she did not know exactly how she should manage. How could her trunk be taken away without inconvenient questions from the hotel clerk, or perhaps from Mrs. Grant, who always knew everything that was going on in the house? A thousand obstacles seemed ready to arise and prevent the carrying out of her wonderful plan. When she said her prayers she decided to ask God to help her.

"For it isn't as if it were a wrong thing," she thought. "It's nothing wicked I want to do. Aunt Clara doesn't want me here any more. I believe she'll be rather glad to have me out of the way, and not have my brother or my uncle come for me. Of course, she won't like my doing it, but that's just Aunt Clara. And I won't be stealing the money she gives me for the hat. It will be really my money.

ISABEL TAKES A JOURNEY

At least I think it will be, but I can use it and then, when I get there I can ask one of my relations if they would call it stealing, and if they do, I will find some way of earning some money and sending it back to Aunt Clara. Perhaps they will lend it to me and I can pay them sometime. I wish I had some one to ask advice of, that could answer me, a person right here in the room, I mean, but as I haven't, I think I'll pray about it. I have a sort of feeling that if I ask God to help me run away He will make it easy if it's all right for me to do it." And with this simple but sincere faith, she added the petition to her usual morning prayers.

It was almost ten o'clock when Don Manuel drove up to the door in the shining new touring car with the chauffeur in livery which had already made a profound impression upon Mrs. Grant, the hotel proprietor, and others. Mrs. Todd, in her gray dust coat and the hat bought for these motor trips, was ready to start, and with a parting word to her niece she hurried down to the street.

Isabel, from the window, watched her get in and drive away. "Good-by, Aunt Clara," she whispered. "Good-by!" And then, in spite of herself, even though there was no time to be spent in tears, she could not help crying. Probably she would never see Aunt Clara again, for she was going to Spain to live.

THE SECRET STAIRS

Mrs. Todd had given her the money without saying in so many words that it was to be spent only for a hat, and this eased Isabel's conscience considerably and made her feel that already her prayers were being favorably answered. Her aunt had said, "Here's fifteen dollars, child, and if you see a hat you like, you'd better get it, though, of course, I think it would be safer to wait till I can go with you to choose one, and probably I can to-morrow. You can do what you like."

"*If you see a hat you like!*" "You can do what you like." If she did not look, she would not see, there was no gainsaying that truth. She would go to the station as soon as she had packed, buy her ticket, and take the first train for Boston that she could get. With the fifteen dollars in addition to three dollars and seventeen cents she found in her purse, she felt herself to be a rich woman.

The next necessity was to pack. She decided to place everything in her trunk except the most necessary things for her journey and for her first night. These she would take in her bag, which was large and roomy and of which Isabel was exceedingly proud. Her aunt had bought it for her when they came East. How many things Aunt Clara had given her! Everything that she owned, in fact. The tears came into her eyes again, and some went splashing down on the shiny leather of the bag. She hastily

ISABEL TAKES A JOURNEY

wiped them away. It would not do to cry now. There was no time to spare for vain regrets.

At last the trunk was packed and locked, and all that was left had been gathered into the bag. Everything was done, with the exception of putting on her hat and writing to her Aunt Clara. One was easy enough, but the other proved to be the most difficult task yet. She sat at the table with the sheet of paper before her and her pen in her hand, and the precious moments sped away while she pondered what she should say. At last this note was written:

“DEAR AUNTIE CLARA:

“I have gone to Bayport. I have taken the money you gave me this morning, hoping you won't mind my using it for my ticket instead of a hat. As you are going to be married so very soon I am sure you will not miss me. I heard you tell Mrs. Grant you expected to be married in a fortnight, so I thought I had better go to Bayport by myself instead of waiting for some one to come for me, it would be such a trouble for them and, besides, I would rather go alone than with a strange brother. I thank you very much for always being so kind to me. Oh, dear Auntie Clara, I am sorry to go away from you like this, but I don't see how to help it and you are going to Spain so soon and I would rather

THE SECRET STAIRS

get through with it soon and not wait for the wedding, but I hope you and Don Manuel will be very happy and I hope, Aunt Clara, you will not be mad with me for going to-day. I have packed my trunk, but I can't take it with me on account of people seeing it go and they would stop me and ask me some questions, so please send it to me. Oh, Aunt Clara, please write to me and tell me you love me still, although I've run away. Aunt Clara, I love you so much, I don't feel as if I could stay till you are married and go away for good. Please, please forgive me, and don't stop loving me because I am so bad as to run away. And please write to me soon."

By this time Isabel was crying so hard she could hardly see her handwriting, and the paper was blotted, but she had no time to write another letter. She signed it, "Your loving niece and always your own little girl, Bella." She put it into an envelope, and was about to seal it, when it occurred to her, that it would be more civil, under the circumstances, to send a message of some kind to her future uncle, so she added: "P. S. Please give my remembrances to Don Manuel y Zorolla." It was the best she could think of. "Love," or even "regards," were out of the question. Then she sealed the letter and

ISABEL TAKES A JOURNEY

placed it on the dressing table, standing it against the pincushion that it might be seen at once when her aunt came in.

And by that time she herself would be far away, perhaps would be in Bayport! She had no idea of the length of time it would take to reach her journey's end, but she would be beyond the familiar experience of her aunt's return from some expedition, every detail of which was always recounted to Isabel. Aunt Clara loved to describe her own good times. How strange it would be to hear no more of them! She wondered if her Bayport aunts would be in the least like Aunt Clara! And then she picked up her bag and started upon her long journey to find out.

Her packing and her letter-writing had consumed a large part of the morning, for her aunt had not left the house until nearly ten o'clock. It was a few minutes after twelve when Isabel reached the Grand Central Station, and a train for Boston, she was informed, had just left. There was another, however, at one o'clock, due in Boston at six. She decided to use the hour in getting something to eat. She felt a little shy about going into the restaurant and sitting at a table alone. New York was so vast and hurrying a place that it frightened her, especially here in this huge station, for even in the middle of the day it was full of people. She wandered about, wondering what she had better do. Although Isa-

THE SECRET STAIRS

bel was only fourteen, she had traveled enough to know that she must be careful, and when a woman approached her and asked her what she was looking for, and did she need help, she promptly declined it and walked away. Presently she found a counter where she could buy sandwiches and doughnuts, and then she sat down and waited. And at last the doors which led to the train were opened and the long stream of passengers was allowed to go through.

The first part of the journey passed uneventfully. Isabel ate her luncheon, read a magazine that she had bought in the station, and looked out of the window. When they were fairly out of the city, and had left behind them the small suburban towns and villages, the view interested her. Although she was New England by inheritance, she had never seen New England, and Connecticut was a part of it, she knew, and every mile over which they sped lessened the distance between her and her new-old home, and those strange, unknown people whom she would call aunts and uncle! Until the last week she had scarcely given them a thought. Now they, with Philip, seemed the most important persons in the whole wide world.

And how very queer and unfortunate and aggravating it was, she thought, that after longing all her life for a brother, she had suddenly found that she

ISABEL TAKES A JOURNEY

had one whom she could not possibly love, nor even like! Far, far better it would be to have no brother at all!

She reached this depressing conclusion just as the train drew up at New London. Here her mind was diverted from her dismal revery, and she looked eagerly from the window at the wharves and the water, the yachts and the other sailing-craft. It was all so beautiful and fascinating that she paid no attention to what was happening in the car. It was not until the train started again that she found that the two chairs directly across the aisle from hers, which had been empty, were now claimed by two boys who seemed to be about seventeen or eighteen years of age.

They were carrying a quantity of luggage, suitcases, tennis rackets, coats and all sorts of things, which they were engaged in stowing away in the rack and on the floor. Then they shook out their newspapers and were just about to begin to read, when simultaneously they began to laugh. It was evidently an excellent joke which it was not necessary to mention, for neither had said a word when at the same minute they both exploded into uproarious mirth. One of them in particular threw back his head and laughed so heartily that Isabel felt like laughing, too, although she knew of nothing that was funny, but these boys were so jolly—espe-

THE SECRET STAIRS

cially the one with the dark chestnut hair—that she liked them at once.

At last he spoke. "If that wasn't the limit!" he remarked to his friend. And then they stopped laughing as suddenly as they had begun, held up their newspapers and solemnly began to read, but Isabel could see that one of them at least was still "laughing inside," as she expressed it, and she wondered what the joke could have been. She wished that she knew two nice boys, such as they seemed to be, especially the one whose face she could see, for he had turned his chair. It was a charming face. He was reading, and the fun had left it, but she liked even better the thoughtful expression upon it now. His forehead was broad and his eyes rather far apart under straight, dark eyebrows, and his hair grew thick above his forehead. In fact, he was a good-looking youth.

She turned suddenly toward her window lest he should look up and find her staring at him, but she wished that she knew him. She had no boy friends, and very few girl friends. Although Isabel had not realized it, her aunt had never encouraged her to be much with other young people. In the small western town which had been their home she had attended school, but her education had been interrupted by frequent journeys. They were constantly packing up and starting on a trip, driven hither and

ISABEL TAKES A JOURNEY

thither by Mrs. Todd's restless spirit. Intensely selfish, she had wished to monopolize Isabel. She felt that she had a perfect right to do this, for was she not supporting the child? She was always kind and affectionate, and it never occurred to Isabel that anything was amiss, but the girl was growing up with no knowledge at all of other young people. She could take care of herself on a journey, she could shop with discretion, and she had had an experience of life, and of grown people of a certain sort, which was unusual for a girl of fourteen, but she had studied little in school-books, she was utterly unfamiliar with sports and the ordinary, everyday doings of other girls and boys, and had she realized in the least what this ordeal would be that was before her, she probably would have dreaded the new life among her father's family even more than she did. Fortunately for her, she was ignorant of all that it would mean.

She sat quietly in her place as the train sped on, venturing now only an occasional glance at her neighbors, who had become very quiet and were apparently absorbed in the news of the day.

CHAPTER V

THE "JOKE" AT PROVIDENCE

THE train hastened on, the hours passed, and Isabel, who had been looking again and again at her watch, was thankful at last to find that it was almost five o'clock. She was hungry, for the sandwiches bought in the New York station had not been altogether satisfying, but she knew of no way to get more food. She would be obliged to wait now until she reached Bayport, and she hoped that supper would not be over.

And then a sudden and overwhelming thought came to her. For the first time since she left the hotel in New York it occurred to her that she had not sent word to her relatives that she would arrive that night! She had intended to telegraph them from the Grand Central Station and then had forgotten to do so, and her aunt had particularly requested it in her letter. She had asked for a whole day's notice, and what would she say when a strange little girl appeared at the door and asked to be taken

THE "JOKE" AT PROVIDENCE

in that very night? To Isabel, tired, hungry, spent with the excitement of her hurried departure, this seemed the last straw. She felt that she could not bear it. She wondered if she had enough money to turn around and go back to New York by the first train. Aunt Clara, angry though she would be, would certainly not refuse to receive her. But would she have enough money to do this? She opened her purse and counted all that was left. Her ticket with its special seat and fare on this limited train had cost far more than she had expected. She had only one dollar and seventy-five cents left. She could not return to New York. She must continue to Bayport, miserable though the prospect was.

In the meantime, the two boys across the aisle had not been unconscious that a young girl, who seemed to be traveling alone, was seated so near them. The boy who sat facing her had discovered her first, and by some sort of wireless had conveyed to his friend the information that she was rather attractive looking, pretty, in fact, except for the huge "ear-muffs" in which her hair was arranged. This was accomplished by passing his hand over his own ear and signifying by a look of disapprobation that he did not admire that way of doing a girl's hair.

"Awfully pretty hair, though," he murmured, holding up his paper and pointing to a paragraph as though he wished to call his friend's attention to

THE SECRET STAIRS

a bit of news. "Aren't girls funny, covering up their ears that way? Of course, she's only a kid. Wonder why she's all alone?"

"Looks very dejected just now," said the other boy. "Just had a shock of some kind. I saw it come on. She's counting her money. What do you suppose is up? She doesn't look poor."

"Not a bit. Common though, with those horrible muff things over her ears. Nothing I hate more."

"Well, there's something wrong with her, and I'm going to watch."

"I'll bet on you, Jimmy, when there's a damsel in distress." And with this parting fling he leaned back in his chair again, pulled well down over his eyes a cap which he had put on, and soon appeared to be dropping off to sleep. His friend, however, suspected that on the contrary he was uncommonly wide-awake, and as he expressed it to himself, "I'll go him one better if I can!"

The opportunity soon came. The train was approaching Providence when the conductor passed through the car. The little girl across the aisle who, although she had not been crying had looked as if she would like to bury her face in her handkerchief and sob aloud, now became alert. She sat forward, and as the conductor approached she addressed him in a clear, high voice.

"Is this Providence?" she asked.

THE "JOKE" AT PROVIDENCE

"Yes, Providence!" he replied.

"Do we stop long enough for me to send a telegram?"

"Guess not, Miss. You'd have to run for it and most likely you couldn't do it then. We're late, anyhow, so we'll only stop long enough to let off and take on. It all depends upon how much baggage there is. Better wait till you get to Boston."

He passed on his way. Isabel could hardly keep back her tears. Only the fixed determination to do so, that she might not seem to be a child in the eyes of those two fellows across the aisle, restrained her now from really sobbing aloud. Oh, that she had never run away!

And then a pleasant voice, speaking with an accent with which she was wholly unfamiliar, reached her ears. She turned quickly from the window out of which she had been gazing, and found that the light-haired boy from the other side of the aisle was standing beside her chair.

"I beg your pardon," he said, courteously, "but I couldn't help hearing that you would like to send a wire. If you will write it out I should be awfully glad to do it for you. I know the Providence station, and I know just where the Western Union window is. I'm sure I'll have time to do it while we're stopping."

"Oh, thank you!" exclaimed Isabel, smiling up

THE SECRET STAIRS

at him, her face changing from clouds to sunshine. "How good of you! Are you sure you can? I should hate to have you lose the train."

"Oh, that's all right, and if I do I'll take the next! There are plenty of trains to Boston from here. Hurry up, though. We're almost there."

He turned and grinned triumphantly at his friend, while she hastily took a bit of paper and a pencil from her bag and scribbled the following message, addressed to Miss Abby Rodney, Elm Street, Bayport, Mass.

"Hope to arrive Bayport to-night. Forgot to let you know. Will explain. Isabel Rodney."

The train slowed up at Providence as she signed her name. She handed the paper to her new friend, and he dashed to the door. In a moment she saw him running across the station platform. It was not until then that she remembered that she had not given him the money to pay for it.

"I seem to be forgetting everything!" she thought.

In the meantime, the boy who had remained in the train, who was, of course, Isabel's unknown brother Philip, felt that it was now his opportunity "to do the polite." Jimmy Curtis might be doing the knight-to-the-rescue act by foolishly leaving the train and thereby running the risk of missing the roof-garden party in Boston to which they were going, but Philip, here on the spot, would have some fun

THE "JOKE" AT PROVIDENCE

himself. It would be great, he thought, when Jimmy returned "very cocky," for him to find the girl and Philip already old friends, as it were. Without further delay he whirled his chair around, leaned forward in order to watch the vanishing figure of his chum through Isabel's window, and began to talk to her. He felt that the unusual circumstances made this the perfectly proper and obvious thing to do. If his friend and companion was doing her errand, certainly he could enter into a conversation with her.

"He'll do it," he said. "No need to worry. I'll trust him to skin through somehow."

"Oh, I hope so!" exclaimed Isabel, who was also so much absorbed in watching that it never occurred to her that there was anything in the least unusual in this sudden acquaintance. Then, too, she had traveled much with her aunt, who was given to making quick friendships with people whom she chanced to meet, and, therefore, now it seemed perfectly natural.

"It was so good of him to go for me. I should feel dreadfully if he lost the train. And all his things are here! How perfectly awful it would be if he had to wait for another!"

"Oh, you needn't worry!" said Philip, again. "Jimmy'll come out on top all right. There he is! See? Just coming out that farthest door. By Jim-

THE SECRET STAIRS

iny, the train's moving! He'll have to run, there he goes! He's making for the last car. Great Cæsar's ghost! Oh, well, you needn't worry. I tell you, Jimmy'll do it if anybody could. Why, he made the forty-yard dash at school last year. He knows how to run."

"But suppose he got killed trying to get on the train!" exclaimed Isabel, turning a pale and frightened face from the window when she could no longer see him. "I should never forgive myself! I should always feel like a murderer."

She remembered as she said this that she had thought about that murderer text in the Bible in connection with her own brother. Oh, she did so wish that her brother might be like one of these nice boys! Of course, he wouldn't be, or he would have written to her. And she might be the means of killing, yes, *killing* one of them!

"Indeed you needn't worry," said Philip again, laughing, although he was touched by her face. She was a nice little kid, though, of course, a bit common in her appearance. She seemed to know how to behave, however. Philip was a trifle particular in his judgments. He could have a lot of fun with girls and was always "ready," but he had his private opinion of those who were too "ready" themselves. The two watched now the door at the back of the car. Some of the other passengers, who had heard and

THE "JOKE" AT PROVIDENCE

enjoyed the episode, were watching, too. In a few minutes Jimmy appeared. He came rather slowly, seemingly unconscious of the fact that there had been a possibility that he would be left behind. His face was a study. He really looked strange, as Philip discovered at once.

"What's happened to old Jim?" he asked himself.

"Oh, I'm so glad you were not left!" cried Isabel. "I'm ashamed of being so stupid as to forget to send it from New York. How can I thank you enough?"

"Oh, that's all right," replied Jim, in a queer, unnatural voice. He actually seemed to be embarrassed, his friend thought with immense amusement. What in the world had happened to him there at Providence? It was not at all like him to be "fazed" by sending a telegram for a little girl.

"And I forgot to give you the money!" continued Isabel, contritely. "How much did you pay for it?"

"Nothing at all. I said 'collect.' There was no time for anything else. Was that all right?"

"Ye-e-s," she replied, rather doubtfully. "I don't know——" She was about to say that she did not know if it was all right because she had never met her aunt, when it occurred to her that this would sound very peculiar. She must in no way allow them to suspect that she was on her way to a family whom she had never seen. That would, indeed, be

THE SECRET STAIRS

humiliating. So she changed the ending of her sentence. She hesitated, and then added: "I don't know how I happened to forget to send it from New York. I thank you ever so much."

She had a charming smile, and Philip decided that though she was certainly a bit common, she was really a nice little thing. He wondered why on earth Jim had become so glum—not exactly glum, either, for he seemed to be amused, too, and he was evidently thinking hard. It was not a bit like old Jimmy to do so much thinking.

After a little more conversation they all settled back in their chairs, for neither Jim nor the girl seemed to be in the mood for talking. It was plain that the girl had something on her mind, for even though Jimmy had returned uninjured, and the wire had been sent, she still seemed to be worried. As for Jim—what on earth had happened to him during those few minutes at Providence? Philip gave up the problem and opened his book. "But I'll keep my eye on 'em! Something's wrong with 'em both," he thought.

The girl's face grew more and more serious, and she was apparently nervous. She looked at her wrist watch constantly, she studied her time-tables, and when the conductor passed through the car she asked him a question. Philip could not hear what she said, for her voice was now scarcely more than a

THE "JOKE" AT PROVIDENCE

whisper. The conductor was obliged to bend his head to hear. His answer, however, was quite audible.

"You go to the North Station, Miss. It is clear across the city, but a taxi will take you over in ten minutes—no baggage? Oh, then you're all right. You'd better get out at Back Bay, and not go all the way in. It won't be so crowded and you can take a taxi, or walk to the corner and get a subway car, either way you like."

He continued on his way, leaving Isabel more anxious and confused than she had been before. She did not know what to do. She turned involuntarily toward her new friends. The one who had remained in the train at Providence was looking across the aisle in so friendly a manner that she was moved to ask his advice.

"When I get to Boston I have got to go to the North Station, wherever that is, as quickly as I can," she said. "The conductor said to take a taxi or a subway car. Which had I better do? Is it like the New York subway? I've never been in Boston. Is it like New York? That frightens me."

"They are not in the least alike," Philip answered emphatically. "You'll like Boston ever so much better. We're going to get out at the Back Bay Station, too, and we'll see that you get a taxi all right, unless you'd rather take a car. That would be easy, too."

THE SECRET STAIRS

She was dressed as if she had plenty of money, he thought, but that did not mean that she could afford a taxi. You never could tell about girls. The poorest sometimes spent more on their clothes than the richest, he had discovered. Therefore, he would give her the chance to be economical.

But Isabel had not been taught economy, and she remembered that the money she had allowed for the telegram was still in her purse. She could easily afford a taxi, which would take her directly to her destination, and she agreed joyously to Philip's suggestion.

"We leave from the North Station, too," he said, "but we are to dine in town and go to a show, so we're not going home till late. It's an engagement, so we have to keep it, or we'd see that you got over there all right."

At this Jimmy, until now so silent, exploded with laughter. Philip regarded him with an expression of mild remonstrance. He turned to Isabel. "Don't mind him," he said. "That's only his little way. He met a joke at Providence. Haven't you seen him grinning at intervals ever since?"

"I sure did meet a joke, old man," said Jimmy, his first remark for twenty minutes, "and what's more, the joke's on you!" Then he pulled himself together, as it were. He turned with great politeness to Isabel. "Our engagement is something we

THE "JOKE" AT PROVIDENCE

can't very well give up, for we have come up from New London on purpose to go. We wanted awfully to stay longer, at least I did, but my friend here wouldn't listen to it. You see, he's mighty particular about keeping all his dates, especially with special people, don't you know, like the one to-night. She's——"

"Jimmy, you shut up, will you?" growled Philip.

"But we'll do anything we can for you," continued Jim, not heeding him, "and some day perhaps I'll have a chance to explain my little joke to you. It's rather a good one, but—well, I can't just now, and I have sort of an idea, don't you know, that we may meet again. Kind of psychic premonition—'when shall we three meet again' sort of stuff."

Philip stared at him. Where had he learned about "psychic premonitions?" And coming out of his brown study to do the polite act, and use these long words! "And isn't he going some to say we'll meet again! Well, I'll have it out with him later. The kid wouldn't understand if I went for him now," said Philip to himself. He contented himself, therefore, with a withering glance at his friend, who returned it in kind, and both resumed the reading of their magazines.

CHAPTER VI

"IS YOUR NAME ISABEL RODNEY?"

THE train was now running through the suburbs of Boston. The passengers had begun to gather their possessions together, the porter was busy with his brush; in fact, everything showed that the journey was nearly at an end. Isabel felt quite ready to leave the train, but in her heart she wished that the trip had just begun. Indeed, she would have been glad to be back in New York in the dingy little hotel, listening to her aunt's account of the day's expedition. Probably her aunt had returned by now, had found her note, and was at that minute reading it! A wave of unutterable loneliness swept over the little girl. Fourteen though she was, and mature and independent in her way of thinking, she was nothing but an unhappy and homesick child as the train swept into Boston and drew up in the Back Bay Station. She dreaded the parting from those nice, jolly, friendly boys. If only she could have had a brother like one of them!

"IS YOUR NAME ISABEL RODNEY?"

They certainly were very nice to her. Although they had so much luggage themselves, one of them carried her bag, the other her jacket, and Philip went up in the elevator with her, laughing and talking as if they had known each other all their lives; while Jimmy dashed up the stairs, almost knocking down several people in his haste to secure a taxi for her. They put her in, gave exact instructions to the chauffeur, bade her a laughing farewell, and in another moment she was gone. She looked through the back window of the cab and saw them still looking after her, still waving their hats and nodding and smiling.

"Oh, what nice boys!" she thought. "I never knew there were such nice boys in the world! Oh, what is my brother going to be like? If only one of them were my brother Philip! I'm afraid to go to Bayport and find out what he's really like. The uncle and aunts will be bad enough to meet, but to have a brother there who isn't going to like me and I'm not going to like! Oh, dear, it's too awful!"

She looked from the window but she saw little. She could think of nothing but that she was lonely and frightened, as the cab dashed past the beautiful Public Garden and the Common, and then turned into the narrower streets of the West End.

They reached the North Station in a very short time and she got out, paid the driver, and entered the

THE SECRET STAIRS

big waiting-room. It seemed to her as she closed her purse that there was very little money left in it, and a dim feeling of anxiety took possession of her. What if she had not enough money left to pay her fare to Bayport? She had not the least idea of how much it would be. She approached the ticket window and timidly asked the price of a ticket. Then she counted the change in her purse. She was short of the required amount by exactly twelve cents. She could not go to Bayport that night. Where, then, should she go? She was entirely alone and friendless in a strange city. Night was coming on, she was hungry and tired, and she was terrified. What should she do? She sat down near the ticket window and tried to think. She knew that she must try to think calmly and not let her fright get the better of her. But what had she better do?

When Isabel's taxicab had rounded the corner from the Back Bay Station into Dartmouth Street, and thus had disappeared from view, Philip turned to his friend.

"Quite a little adventure," said he, laughing; "a nice little girl, though a bit different somehow. Was it the way she talks? Kind of a twang, or something. Maybe she's from the West or the South or somewhere. I wonder where she's going to from the North Station. She didn't say, and I didn't exactly like to ask her. Come along, Jimmy. You

“IS YOUR NAME ISABEL RODNEY?”

know we've got to fix up a bit before we join the gang.”

“I happen to know where she's going,” said Jim, making no sign of stirring.

His voice and manner had again become peculiar, so much so that Philip regarded him with close attention. He was not looking at Philip, however. He stood gazing down at the pavement beneath his feet, as though studying its appearance with close attention, grinding it with the handle of his hitherto greatly prized tennis racquet. Apparently he was trying to make a hole in the smooth surface of the asphalt.

“Jimmy,” said his friend, “did you by any chance meet a ghost in the Providence station? Would you mind telling me what did happen to you there? You're a changed man since you left my sheltering wing to send that kid's wire. Did you happen to get a message from the spirit world? Come, for goodness' sake, take a brace, old man, and tell me, what you found out at Providence!”

“I will tell you,” replied Jim, with a solemnity so unusual that it would have been alarming if Philip had not found it so funny. “I found out something awfully strange and queer. It's so queer and—and—why, you'd hardly believe it, Phil—I—I—don't know how on earth to tell you. You see, I couldn't tell you before; haven't had a chance, you know, till

THE SECRET STAIRS

this minute. But—but—well, you see, I suppose I've got to now, and—and——”

“Heavens and earth, Jim, have you gone dotty?” exclaimed Philip, becoming more and more mystified. “Out with it and you'll feel better. I guess I won't faint.”

“Well,” said Jimmy, “well—that girl, you know, that kid——” He stopped short.

“Well, what of her? She's gone, and we'll probably never see her again. What has she got to do with the state of complete imbecility you seem to be in?”

“She's got a great deal to do with it! She's the whole of it!” burst out Jim, stung into the power of speech at last. “The telegram she sent was to your aunt! She's on her way to Bayport. She is your sister!”

Philip looked at him. Now he was the one to become dumb. Then his power of reasoning reasserted itself. Such a statement as that just made by James Curtis, 3rd, was so preposterous as to be false on the face of it. Jimmy was simply trying out one of his tiresome old jokes. He had said at least twice that he had a joke on Phil.

“Rats!” said Philip, therefore. “Come off, Jimmy. You can't get a rise out of me at this late date. Come along, or I'll know you *have* gone dotty. I strongly suspect it now.”

“IS YOUR NAME ISABEL RODNEY?”

But Jim did not move. “I don’t wonder you don’t believe me, Phil, but really it’s the truth.” He spoke now so seriously and so directly that Philip was impressed, in spite of what he considered his better judgment. “The wire was to your Aunt Abby, right address and all. It said to expect her to-night, and *it was signed ‘Isabel Rodney.’*”

And then Philip knew at last that Jim was speaking the truth.

“And—and you’ve known it ever since Providence!” he exclaimed. “Why in thunder didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“How could I? She was right there. She’d have heard me.”

“You could have written it. You could have managed somehow. We could have gone into the smoker. You were a complete idiot.”

“Maybe I was, but I just didn’t know what to do. It’s sort of awkward to bring on the lost brother act right in a parlor car on the Limited. I was afraid she’d faint or have hysterics or something. You never can tell what a girl will do.”

“That’s true,” agreed Philip. “But, good gracious, Jim, I’ve just remembered! There she’s gone off alone, and is going to Bayport, and they don’t know she’s coming, at least they didn’t know till they got her wire. Aunt Abby is probably all fussed up and—Great Cæsar’s Ghost! I’ll go after

THE SECRET STAIRS

her. I'll try to catch up to her before she leaves Boston." He glanced up at the clock above them in the station entrance. "I'll have time if I take that taxi." An empty cab was just drawing up at the curb. He threw in his things. "North Station, and extra fare if you make it inside of ten minutes!" he said.

"Right-o!" replied the man, as he slammed the door.

"But Phil, the party!" cried the amazed Jimmy. He knew how much the prospect of this particular festivity had meant to Philip.

"Party be hanged!" was Phil's answer. "Tell 'em my sister has arrived unexpectedly, and I've got to go home."

And then for the second time since his arrival in Boston, Jim Curtis watched a taxicab round the corner into Dartmouth Street. "Well," he thought, "I'm glad he's done it, for, of course, it's the only decent thing to do, but I didn't suppose he would, seeing it's the Duanes' party, and Anne Pendleton's going to be there. What will she say, I wonder? Had old Phil dangling all this while. How will she like the long-lost sister turning up? Mighty nice girl, that kid sister, and I'm glad of it. Phil's been dreading her more than he would let on. I hope he catches her, for I must say *I* shouldn't want to appear a stranger and an outcast, so to speak, on

“IS YOUR NAME ISABEL RODNEY?”

the Rodney doorstep. Of course, they'll all be nice to her. No doubt about that, and Miss Lydia is jolly and so is Uncle Charles. But Miss Abby! Holy Moses!" He gathered up his things once more which he had deposited on the ground, and he, too, left the station.

Philip, rattling along in the taxi, turning short corners, narrowly escaping huge trucks, frightening pedestrians, and bringing upon the driver the frowning suspicion of more than one policeman, thought only of getting there in time. That was his sister! That nice, well-mannered girl, with the pretty hair in the hideous ear-muffs, with the pleasant but high-pitched voice which spoke in such strange, flat accents, in the expensive but showy clothes—that was his sister Isabel! He had always secretly longed for a sister. He liked girls in general, and, brought up by his aunts and uncle as he had been, he had rather envied fellows who had a different sort of family life. He had never mentioned the existence of this sister to any one of his friends with the exception of Jim Curtis. He was ashamed of the fact that he had never seen her, when he was small. Now that he was older, he still felt a certain reserve, but of a different kind.

He knew that if she could ever come into his life he would probably be very fond of her, but there had been no apparent possibility that this would

THE SECRET STAIRS

ever happen until now, and within the past week, beneath all his surface laughter and fun, had been the knowledge that she was coming. What would she be like? And within the last couple of hours, all unconsciously, he had seen and talked with her! Oh, why did the taxi crawl as it did? He must go down to Bayport with her; it would never do for her to go alone.

When he entered the large waiting room of the North Station, Philip felt little hope of being able to find his sister among the crowd which filled it. At that hour of the evening the place was always full, and, just as he entered, the passengers from one of the through trains were passing to the street. He knew that a train for Bayport was to leave in about ten minutes, and it was probable that Isabel was already in her seat, but he would give a hasty glance around the station before looking for her in the train.

But the hasty glance at first revealed nothing. She must be in the train, then. He was hurrying to one of the doors which led to the train shed when he came upon her. She was in a corner, almost hidden from sight by a big man with a widely spread newspaper. When Philip caught sight of her she was sitting with her eyes cast down, and upon her face was an expression so pathetic that his heart was touched. Poor little sister! Was she so miserable

"IS YOUR NAME ISABEL RODNEY?"

at the thought of coming to live with them? Was it possible that she was frightened? It looked like it.

Philip walked up to her and stood still, directly in front of her. He said nothing. She looked up, startled. Then her face changed. The color returned to it, and her eyes, those clear, honest eyes which he had liked, were filled with welcome, and she smiled with intense and touching relief.

"Oh!" she breathed, in scarcely more than a whisper. "How wonderful!" she rose to her feet. "I've been so frightened, but now everything will be all right, for I know you'll help me!"

"What's the matter?" demanded Philip, glaring at her big neighbor absorbed in his paper. "Anybody been annoying you?"

"Oh, no, not at all! But I didn't know what to do—I—I—it is too ridiculous, but I haven't got quite enough—that is—I'm so ashamed, but would you—could you—you've been so nice and friendly——" She broke off. He had been friendly, but, after all, he was such a stranger that she did not even know his name! Then she began again. "I hate to ask you, but do you think you could lend me twelve cents? I know you must think it awfully queer, but, you see, I thought I was going to have enough money when I left New York to get here, but everything has cost so much more than I ex-

THE SECRET STAIRS

pected, and when I asked the price of the ticket to Bayport I didn't have enough. So I had to sit down here and think what to do. Oh, I am so glad to see you! For you do seem like a friend. It was too wonderful to look up and see you standing in front of me!"

He turned and glanced at the clock. "Come on! We can just make the Bayport train," he said, picking up her bag and carrying it with his own.

"But—but—my ticket!" she said timidly. Didn't he understand? Would she have to explain to him again that she wished to borrow twelve cents?

"Oh, that's all right. Hurry! I've got some Bayport tickets. I—I live there."

He lived in Bayport! Was there ever anything so extraordinary? She hurried along by his side, wondering if by any chance he knew her relatives, but not exactly wishing to ask him, for fear of revealing the mortifying fact that she did not know them herself. She decided not to put the question quite yet. Then she remembered the engagement which, according to his friend, he had been so determined to keep that he had shortened his visit in New London.

"If you put me on the train, are you going to have time to get to your theater party?" she asked. "And you said it was a dinner first. It's after seven now."

"IS YOUR NAME ISABEL RODNEY?"

"I know it is. I'm not going to it. I'm going home." His tone was abrupt. In some way, though, the change was too subtle for her to define, he was different from what he had been only a short half hour ago. It was funny, she thought, that his friend had changed, too, while he was out of the train at Providence. But there was no time to think more about it, for now they had reached the Bayport train and he was helping her up the steps. "Go far forward," he advised. "We'll find a seat, and—and we can talk."

It was his turn now to feel uneasy. He did not know at all how he was to tell this new acquaintance that he was her brother, but it must be done before they arrived at Bayport, which place, by this train, was not very far away.

Isabel decided that he must have received some urgent message calling him home at once. She wondered what it was, but, of course, she could not ask. He did not seem to feel like talking, so after one or two attempts at trivial conversation she too became silent, and she sat looking out of the window as they moved out of Boston, at the water, the drawbridges, the myriads of tracks and trains. It was still broad daylight. There was a delicious tang of salt in the air which came through the door when it was opened, and she could actually see the sea in the distance.

And then, suddenly, just when she had about made

THE SECRET STAIRS

up her mind to tell him that she was on her way to her relations, the Rodneys, and to ask him if by any chance he knew them, he abruptly turned to her.

"Is your name Isabel Rodney?" he demanded, in a voice so harsh and strange that no one would have recognized it.

"Yes!" she replied, a little frightened by his manner. "How—how did you know—perhaps then you know my fam—my aunts and uncle—in Bayport? I was just going to ask you if you did. I'm going there. Their name is Rodney, too. Do you by any chance know them, or know of them? It will be nice if you do happen to know them, and then I can easily pay you what I owe you," she added, with a little laugh.

"Oh, you needn't worry about that," he said, "for I—I am Philip Rodney."

She turned slowly and looked into his face. "You—are—Philip? My brother Philip?"

"I'm the man," he said, trying to laugh. He was provoked with himself for being so nervous—or something. "Can you bear it?" An expression of tenderness came into his eyes. "I say, Isabel, I can't stand it if you cry, or are afraid of me. I'm mighty glad we've got together at last. I hope you are. I've just hated not knowing my own sister."

CHAPTER VII

THE RODNEYS OF BAYPORT

THE house in Bayport which had been the home of four generations of the Rodney family was built, as many Bayport houses are, with its side toward the street. One reached the front door by a short brick walk. At the back was a large, old-fashioned garden, surrounded by a high brick wall. The passer-by could see the tops of the fruit trees, and the vines which grew over the wall, but nothing more. Miss Rodney, when she worked in her garden, was completely hidden, and the Professor, walking up and down the paths of a summer evening, his hands behind him and his pipe in his mouth, felt all the security and seclusion of a country home, although they were close to the heart of the city.

There were two gates in the brick wall, one at the back which led to the garden next door, another over on the other side and opening upon a narrow alley, by which the tradespeople had always delivered the necessities of life to the family.

On the eventful day in September which was

THE SECRET STAIRS

bringing Isabel Rodney to the home of her fathers, life went on precisely as usual in the household until supper time drew near. The Rodneys had never changed to the modern dinner hour and supper continued to be the name of the evening meal. As the weather continued to be somewhat warm, and daylight-saving being still in force, there was yet an hour or so in which to be out of doors. Miss Abby and Miss Phœbe were in their customary places on the back piazza, Miss Abby sitting upright and portly in a straight-backed porch chair, and Miss Phœbe lying in a steamer chair, with pillows and shawls to make her comfortable. Mr. Rodney walked about the garden, stopping now and then to peer into the face of a pansy, or to twitch the dead leaves from a geranium. From beyond the brick wall came the sounds of traffic, for High Street was not far away with its busy throngs, and nearer to the house a steady stream of motor vehicles passed at this hour; but within the garden there was the usual sense of peace, and of remoteness from the modern world. Miss Abby's hands were occupied with her knitting, but her eyes watched her brother. Of course, Charles loved the garden, but he sometimes made mistakes. She hoped that he would be careful in breaking off the phlox that had gone by. He so often did it too soon.

She was about to issue a warning when the front

THE RODNEYS OF BAYPORT

doorbell rang violently. As one maid was out and the other busy with her biscuits, Miss Abby herself went to the door. She returned presently, looking agitated, and with a face most unusually pale.

"A telegram!" she exclaimed breathlessly, as she sank heavily into her chair. "Now, Phœbe, don't get nervous, will you? I beg of you not to get nervous. Charles, it is a telegram addressed to me. Please come nearer, Charles, in case Phœbe—you never can tell! Oh, do you suppose something has happened to Philip? Now, my dear Phœbe, you know it may be nothing—nothing at all!"

"I wish you would open it, sister," said Miss Phœbe. "I know it may be nothing!"

"But do people ever telegraph about nothing?" demanded Miss Abby, as she tore open the envelope. Then: "It is from Isabel! 'Isabel Rodney' is the signature!" Her hands with the fluttering paper fell in her lap. "Phœbe, you must be calm! You must try to take it very quietly!"

"What is it, Abby?" asked her brother. "Phœbe is perfectly calm. What does little Isabel say?"

"She is on her way here! She is to arrive this very evening! She forgot to let us know!" For a moment no one said a word. Then the Professor removed his pipe at which he had been puffing furiously. "Good!" said he, with fervor. "What a relief! Now I shall not have to go to the wedding."

THE SECRET STAIRS

"Charles!" exclaimed Miss Abby reproachfully. "Is that all you think of?"

"I think it's quite enough! Why, my dear girls, you don't know how I've been dreading that wedding, and now our niece will be here to-night. Fine! Fine! Nothing could be better."

Miss Abby turned to her sister. Devoted as she was to the welfare of her brother and nephew, she frequently felt that men could be aggravating in the extreme. "Phœbe dear, are you quite comfortable? Do you want some ammonia? It is a shock, I know."

"But a pleasant shock, sister," said Miss Phœbe, in her faintly protesting voice. "I'm glad the child is coming. I've been looking forward to it."

"Of course you have," said Charles, who of late had begun to think that Abby, for all her excellent common sense and her grasp of affairs, was perhaps making a mistake in regard to Phœbe. "We've all been looking forward to it. Of course, she'll make a change in our family life, but it will probably be a change for the better."

"I hope so, I'm sure," said Abby, gloomily. "But I see no sign of it as yet. The very manner of her coming shows her to be a heedless, thoughtless child. Never letting us know until she was almost here! I said, especially, to give me a day's notice, if she came sooner than we expected her. The room is not

THE RODNEYS OF BAYPORT

ready, Lydia has gone on that long motor trip, it is Jenny's day out, and above all, Philip is away. He should have been here to receive his sister, of course. Everything is as bad as possible. Well, I must go make up the bed. There's no knowing when she will get here, for she doesn't say. We don't even know where she was when she sent the telegram. Charles, please, very carefully pick a few flowers for her room. You will be careful, won't you? I'd do it myself if I didn't have to make up the bed."

As she hurried into the house Charles and Phœbe exchanged a glance of amused relief. Abby would in the end "take it all right, but wasn't she amusing?" the glance said. This brother and sister did not always require spoken language to express their thoughts, and Miss Phœbe's sense of humor had kept her alive for a good many years. She believed that it had been granted to her in place of Abby's iron constitution, and on the whole she felt that she would rather have it.

Hour after hour went by. The room was soon ready, for there had really been little to do to it. The few specks of dust which had collected on the smooth mahogany tops of dressing table and chest of drawers since Miss Lydia's last dusting were removed by Miss Abby. The immaculate muslin curtains which hung in the three windows were twitched into better position, fresh towels were hung on the

THE SECRET STAIRS

rack, and a silk puff placed at the foot of the four-post bed in case of an east wind in the night. The bowl of flowers added a touch of festivity, and as Miss Abby stepped back to view the effect of the whole, she said to herself that she hoped this new niece would keep the room looking as nice as she found it, but she had her doubts about a girl of fourteen whom she had not herself brought up. It was too bad, if Isabel was to come to them at all, that she had not been allowed to come earlier in her life. Then Miss Abby rejoined her brother and sister, and the long period of waiting began.

Supper, of course, was on the table precisely at seven o'clock. This was the Rodney custom, and no new Rodney's coming could effect a change. When Philip was late, as he frequently was, something was kept for him and the same should be done for Isabel, but the family would eat as usual. It was not quite as usual, however. There was a sense of half-suppressed excitement which took away the Rodney appetite. Miss Lydia, coming home from her motor trip just as they were sitting down, had to be told the news, and the Professor divided his attention equally between his supper and a time-table. He announced presently that she ought to be here at any moment now, if she had arrived in Boston by such and such a train. But had she? No one knew, and Miss Abby said she was undoubtedly a thoughtless

THE RODNEYS OF BAYPORT

girl not to have done so. The family could see that Abby, as usual, was preparing for the worst.

When for the fourth time she advised Phœbe to remember her nerves and not sit up any longer, the hands on the old clock were pointing to the hour of eight, and precisely at that moment there was the sound of a latchkey in the front door.

"Why, that sounds like Philip!" exclaimed Miss Abby. "Can he be getting home as early as this?"

In another moment her question was answered, for Philip appeared in the doorway of the living room.

"Hullo, everybody!" Then he paused, turned and stepped back. "Come," he said, to some one in the darker hall; "come on! It's all right. Don't worry!"

"Is some one with you, Philip? How nice to see you home so early! What happened?" asked his aunts.

"This happened," replied Philip. He drew his sister into the doorway, and they stood there hand in hand.

The aunts stared in amazement. Their brother started, hastily rose to his feet and then remained perfectly still. "Isabel herself!" he said in a low voice.

"Yes, Isabel!" exclaimed Philip joyously. "Here's Isabel!"

THE SECRET STAIRS

The girl was at first so frightened that she scarcely dared raise her eyes. Here were gathered together her nearest kin, and she had never until now seen their faces, had never felt the touch of their hands! Would they be kind faces? Friendly hands? She had already found that her brother's were, but these—these other Rodneys?

In an instant they were greeting her. One aunt, large and portly, was kissing her. Another, small, slender, with a charming face, put her arms about her and led her to the couch, where a third aunt, who was, of course, the invalid, was sitting up ready to welcome her. She also kissed her very kindly. And then the uncle came forward. She did not know this, but since the first moment of her appearance, Mr. Charles Rodney had stood quite still, watching her. Now he placed one hand on her shoulder while with the other he turned up her face to his. Then he bent, and with a certain solemnity, he kissed her. "My dear little girl," he said tenderly, "I am glad you have come to us. This is where you should be."

Supper for the late-comers was soon on the table, and while they ate, the family plied them with questions. Even Aunt Phœbe came into the dining room, though against the wishes of Aunt Abby. These questions Philip attempted to answer in his most off-hand manner, for he guessed only too well the effect

THE RODNEYS OF BAYPORT

upon his Aunt Abby of the account of an acquaintance formed in the parlor car of a train from New York. He was afraid that she would strongly disapprove of a young girl who was not only traveling alone, but who had entered into conversation with two boys who were perfect strangers to her. Sooner or later the facts must, of course, be told, but in order to postpone the fatal moment as long as possible, he plunged into a detailed account of his New London visit.

Isabel at first was perfectly silent. It was all so overwhelming. She had never in her life sat at so large and shining a table. She had never been in a room with so huge a sideboard, nor had she seen outside of a silversmith's so much silver as was displayed on its top. There were so many oil portraits on the walls that she supposed her uncle must be a collector of antiques. That would account, too, for the silver. The china upon which supper was served was blue, and like some that she had seen in a museum. Yes, he was a collector, and they probably used the things themselves until they were sold. She wondered where the shop was.

And the aunts! She knew that she would love the uncle who had looked at her so kindly, but the three aunts! Could she love them *all*? She raised her eyes for an instant and glanced shyly at her Aunt Abby. What a large, rosy face she had, how

THE SECRET STAIRS

smooth was the gray hair above the broad, high forehead, and how her spectacles gleamed in the lamplight! She had a feeling that her Aunt Abby would be critical of everything that she did. The spectacles seemed to see so much. She hastily dropped her eyes again when, after having been directed toward Philip, the spectacles were brought to bear upon her.

"And now, my dear," began Miss Abby, pleasantly but firmly, "we would like to hear how you happened to come a whole month ahead of the date your aunt mentioned, and without letting us know. Of course, we are very glad to see you, but don't you think yourself, as long as I asked you particularly to do so, that you should have written that you were coming, or even have sent your telegram yesterday instead of to-day?"

"But, you see, I didn't know until this morning that I was coming," replied Isabel, the color changing in her face as she spoke. "I only heard quite late yesterday that Aunt Clara was going to be married very soon, and—and—oh, I do hope you don't really mind my coming earlier, but I just can't bear Don Manuel, and—and—I was so lonely—and—and—everything! I hope you don't really mind?"

"Mind! My dear child, we are delighted to see you!" It was her aunt Phœbe who said this. Isabel looked at her gratefully, quite unconscious of the as-

THE RODNEYS OF BAYPORT

tonishment of the others. It was seldom, indeed, that Phœbe asserted herself, and she had done so several times since the telegram came.

"And is it possible that your aunt allowed you to come? Didn't she wish you to stay for her wedding? And why did she not telegraph herself?" demanded Miss Abby, rather annoyed with Phœbe, which gave some asperity to her tone.

"I didn't tell her I was coming," said Isabel. "I just ran away."

There was a moment of absolute silence, broken only by a sort of chuckle from Philip, and the sound of his knife and fork on his plate.

Miss Abby was the first to recover her voice. "I have never heard of anything so—so entirely wrong! You ran away from your aunt who brought you up? Why, Isabel!"

The thought passed through the minds of all the older generation that the girl was certainly the other Isabel's daughter. It was precisely what she would have done. Their opinion was confirmed by the girl's next words.

"Why shouldn't I? Aunt Clara has deserted me, all right. She has no use for me any more, so I—I had a good right to run away. She left me on my own. She might—well, she might have known I—I'd do something. I just couldn't stand it."

She had been about to say something altogether

THE SECRET STAIRS

different, but she stopped herself in time. She would not blame her Aunt Clara to these other aunts. She was sorely hurt by the manner in which she had been turned over to them, but she would not tell them so. And, of course, the Rodneys did not guess the fine spirit of loyalty which caused her to change the ending of her sentence. Her manner, her high, rather shrill voice, a somewhat pert expression of self-assertion that came into the girl's face, combined to cause a distinct recoil among the relatives. They forgot for the moment that she was tired out with the excitement of her adventure, as well as with the real sorrow of losing her aunt, and the uncertainty of her own wisdom in coming. She spoke and she looked as if she were—yes, common! The hair done in that hideous, untidy fashion, the mussed blouse, once white, but white no longer, the string of pearl beads around the throat, the wrist watch and the rings! Miss Abby, for one, was sure that her niece, the only niece of the Rodneys of Bayport, was actually common! And it was precisely what she had feared.

It was Miss Phœbe who guessed at the truth. "It must have been very hard for you, Isabel," she said, quietly. "I am glad you felt that you could come to us, and we are glad to have you come. Now we want to know how you happened to meet Philip, and how you discovered that you were brother and

THE RODNEYS OF BAYPORT

sister. That will be very interesting, and I want to hear all about it."

Isabel looked at her gratefully. The girl's face had instantly softened at those kind words. The "common" expression disappeared, but she was still nervous.

"Well, you see, it was like this," she said. "Of course, I had a lot on my mind, what with packing and—and—oh, everything! The letter I had to write to Aunt Clara, you know, telling her I was leaving. Of course, I meant to telegraph from New York to say I had started, but I just forgot all about it. Then on the train were these two nice fellows, Philip and his friend, only, of course, I hadn't the least idea who they were, but I liked their looks from the start and I wished awfully that I knew them. Well, I got to know them all right! I never thought of the telegram to you until we'd nearly got to Providence, and then the conductor wouldn't let me get out to send it. Said I hadn't time! But Jimmy Curtis, only, of course, I didn't know then that was his name, he said he'd hop out and send it for me, so I scribbled it off and signed my name and he simply scudded! My, how he did scoot! Of course, when he was sending it he had to read it, and then he found out who I was! Wasn't that simply the limit? And he never let on! Came back looking for all the world as if he'd seen a ghost and—well,

THE SECRET STAIRS

he'd simply gone dotty. That was all there was to it. He never said a word till I'd left them in Boston. We all got out together at that station with the funny name you get to first, what do you call it? Oh, yes, Back Bay—if that isn't a scream for the name of a railroad station!—and they packed me off in a taxi, and *then* he told Philip! I guess from what he's told me coming out here that Phil nearly had a fit when he heard the news, but he got over it all right, and then he hopped into a taxi, too, and came racing after me, and it was lucky he did, for, would you believe it, I didn't have enough money left to buy my ticket, and I'd have been sitting in that North Station yet if Phil hadn't come along and done the long-lost-brother act! Wasn't it just too sweet of him to follow me, and give up his roof-garden crowd and everything? I tell you, Phil's a peach all right!"

Her voice, her accent (so unlike their own), her slang, the way in which her words tumbled over each other, were almost too much for Miss Abby. She did not even yet understand something perfectly evident now to all the rest of the family. Fatigue and excitement were causing Isabel to exaggerate all the defects which were the result of her bringing-up. Neither did Miss Abby see the sweetness, the real affection and the gratitude in the girl's face as she turned it toward her brother. Miss Abby, alas, was often blind; but all the others saw.

CHAPTER VIII

"I'M PEGGY DUANE!"

"OF course, we must do something for her, Mother," said Peggy Duane. "She is almost our own cousin, as she is Phil's sister. Could I invite all the girls to luncheon? Or shall we have the boys, too, and have them all to supper? That would be fun. What can we do?"

"My dear, hadn't we better wait until we see her before we decide?" Mrs. Duane was busy with the plants that she was potting for the house. She and Peggy were on the side porch, and it was the morning after Isabel's arrival in Bayport.

"But why, Mother dear? Of course, she must be just like other girls, and, of course, any girl would like some kind of party, and you said yourself, the minute you heard she was coming here to live, that we must be very nice to her because she is Phil's sister. Now, why not have a good big party of some kind and have everybody get to know her right off?"

THE SECRET STAIRS

"I suppose you are doing it entirely to give her pleasure? No other reason in the back of your mind?"

"Why, of course not, Mother! What other reason could I have?" Peggy opened her hazel eyes very wide, and stood looking at her mother, the picture of misunderstood innocence. Then she blushed and dimpled and broke into gay laughter, in which her mother joined.

"Oh, Peggy, Peggy, I can see through you! You can't deceive your mother! I know who likes to give a party, and who will jump at any excuse for doing it! But seriously, Peggy, we had better wait just a few minutes before we decide. Of course, we want to do everything in the world that we possibly can for Isabel, not only because she is Philip's sister, but for her own sake, for she must feel very strange and shy; but if she is shy it might be quite an ordeal for her to meet all the Bayport girls and boys right away, and all at once."

"I don't believe she is so awfully shy, Mother, for she got acquainted with Phil and Jim on the train."

"I know, but still we had better wait until we meet her, and then decide. We will go in there as soon as I finish potting these plants. It will take me about an hour."

"An hour! Oh, Mother dear, you surely can't expect me to wait a whole hour when she is right

"I'M PEGGY DUANE!"

next door? I'm simply dying to see what she's like."

"Oh, very well, run along then and leave me to do this in peace, and I think, on the whole, it would be rather better for you two girls to get acquainted by yourselves."

"Mother darling, you're simply an angel. Then all the children can stay at home, can't they? Dorothy says she's going, and so does Betty, and, of course, Freddy and Miles will insist on going, too. They're crazy about seeing her, ever since Phil came over this morning and told us. It is a pity those children were at the breakfast table and heard it all. Children are so curious."

Her mother laughed at her again. "Just tell them if they say they are going with you that I want them to wait for me. If you slip out the garden gate without telling them they'll never notice. They are all busy about important affairs on the other side of the house. Freddy has discovered what he declares is the hole of some wild animal. Hurry along before they get tired of it."

Peggy, without further delay, ran through their own garden and into that of the Rodneys. Isabel was in her room and saw her coming, for her windows overlooked the garden. She caught her breath sharply. This must be Peggy Duane, she thought, Philip's cousin who lived next door, and of whom

THE SECRET STAIRS

Philip seemed so fond. He had mentioned her several times, and he had gone to his uncle's house early that morning, Isabel supposed in order to tell Peggy all about his new sister. She was suddenly seized with fright. She wished that she could run away again. If only she had never left New York! Aunt Clara's Spaniard was less terrifying than these strange relatives who included a strange girl! And then in a few minutes there was a tap upon the door. "Come in!" she said faintly. It was not heard and there was a second tap. Isabel crossed the room and opened the door.

"I'm Peggy Duane!" said the girl who stood outside. "And I know you're Isabel, Phil's sister, and as Phil is my cousin, of course you're my cousin, too, and so, if you don't mind, I'll kiss you, for I'm awfully glad you've come. I've always been crazy for a girl cousin of my own age, for though we've lots of boy cousins, there isn't a single girl among them, so you see you're filling a long-felt want! Of course, Phil's a perfect dear, and so are my Gilbert cousins, but they're all boys. Of course, boys are great, and I couldn't get along without them, but they are queer sometimes, don't you think so?"

By this time Peggy, with her arm through Isabel's, had led her to the chintz-covered lounge and they were sitting side by side. She paused for breath and Isabel felt that she must make some reply.

"I'M PEGGY DUANE!"

"I—I don't know," she stammered. "I have never known any boys."

"You haven't? Why, how funny! Well, there are plenty here, right in the family, and lots of girls in Bayport, too. We have awfully jolly times together, and I'm sure you'll like us all." Peggy laughed merrily. "That sounds conceited. Of course, I meant to say, you'll like all except Peggy Duane!"

"I like her already," said Isabel, smiling at her. "I only hope you will like Isabel Rodney!"

"Darling, I do!" exclaimed Peggy rapturously. "I'm perfectly sure we shall be intimate friends. Shall we try for it?"

"Oh, do!" said Isabel. "I've never had one in my life, and I've always longed for one."

"You've never had an intimate friend?" Peggy's face showed her amazement. "You can't really mean it. You're probably like me. You exaggerate."

"Oh, no, it's the truth! I've never had one, and so if I don't act just right about being one you'll have to tell me. I might make some mistakes."

"You couldn't, you're such a dear."

"I'm sure I've made some already," said Isabel, solemnly. "I don't mean about being a friend, but being a niece. I'm sure my Aunt Abby doesn't—well, she doesn't seem to approve of me."

Again Peggy laughed. "Oh, don't you worry

THE SECRET STAIRS

about Aunt Abby," she said. "She never approves of any of us. She's always perfectly shocked at everything we do, and, of course, she would be at your running away, and getting to know the boys on the train without a proper introduction. Oh, if you'd tried your hardest you couldn't have hit upon anything that would upset Aunt Abby more completely than just those two things you did do."

Isabel was not cheered by this statement as Peggy had hoped she would be. "How unlucky I am!" she said. "Everything is wrong. Aunt Abby isn't going to like me. She got another telegram last night and it gave her such a fright, and she had had a fright when mine got here. Aunt Clara wanted to know if I was safe, and they had to answer it. I would have sent one myself to Aunt Clara from Boston, only I hadn't enough money, and afterward I was so excited finding out that Philip was my brother I forgot all about Aunt Clara. And when I say anything Aunt Abby sort of jumps. I don't see what it is I do that gets on her nerves. It seems to be when I say anything at all. Now at breakfast I thought I'd show some interest in all those things there in the dining room, so I said to Uncle Charles, 'Say, Uncle, I guess you're some collector all right. I've never seen such dinky silver outside Tiffany's. It's some silver, sure. And those old worthies in the frames. Where did you ever find all the stuff? I

"I'M PEGGY DUANE!"

guess you had to pay a lot for it, but perhaps you're going to make something on it. Uncle Todd had some antiques in his store,' and I was going to tell them about Uncle Todd, my Aunt Clara's first husband, you know, and I noticed Uncle Charles looked queer, and then I looked at Aunt Abby and she was simply glaring at me, and then I looked at Aunt Lydia, and she was all screwed up in the face, and then Philip laughed right out, and he got up and said he was going in to your house. And Aunt Abby made herself awfully stiff and said, awfully majestic, just like Queen Elizabeth or Victoria or some such old lady queen, 'Our silver is all family silver. We *never* buy it, and the pictures are portraits of our ancestors,' and then she stopped and got her breath and said—oh, you never heard such a voice—'and we certainly never *sell* our family possessions!' Well, how was I to know that, when I've only been here overnight? And now you're laughing just the way Phil did. I'm sure I don't mean to be funny."

"I know you don't, you dear darling, but you are, you know! You—must—excuse me, but—but——" Peggy could say no more. She laughed until the tears rolled down her cheeks, and by that time Isabel, who had begun by being slightly offended, was laughing, too, for Peggy's mirth was contagious even though it was directed at Isabel herself.

It is impossible for two persons to laugh together

THE SECRET STAIRS

without acquiring a feeling of friendship, and these girls were no exception to the rule. Isabel felt more light-hearted than had been the case since she first heard of her Aunt Clara's intended marriage. After all, there were two relatives in the world who appeared to like her, her brother and his cousin, and she hoped there were even more, for two of her aunts were very kind to her, and so also was her uncle. Indeed, his manner toward her was marked by a peculiar tenderness which she did not understand, but which filled her with gratitude and happiness. She felt at ease with him already. As her Aunt Phœbe always breakfasted in her room, she had not yet seen her that morning, but Aunt Lyd, as Philip called her, had come to Isabel's door to go down to breakfast with her. Until the unfortunate remark about the silver and the portraits all had gone well, and now had come this pleasant experience of gaining an intimate friend, which was just what she had longed for all her life. The clouds rolled away from Isabel's horizon, and for the next hour or two the sun shone brightly.

Mrs. Duane and her four younger children came in, and although Dorothy, Betty, Freddy and Miles stood in a row and stared at her, Isabel did not mind it in the least. Mrs. Duane was charming, and told her that she was to call her "Aunt Margaret," just as Phil did, and invited her to lunch with them that

"I'M PEGGY DUANE!"

very day. Aunt Lyd suggested going to the shops to see what could be found for her in the way of a blouse and other necessary things, for no one knew when her trunk would arrive, and presently, accompanied by Peggy, they set forth on a shopping expedition.

"Bayport's some town, isn't it?" remarked Isabel, as they turned into High Street. "You know I thought it was a kind of a village! Wasn't that the limit? I thought I was coming to live in the country, and I thought so this morning, too, when I saw the garden and your garden next door. It's great, isn't it, having gardens right in the middle of a big town?"

Aunt Lydia was engaged with a delicate problem and paid no attention to the conversation of the two girls. She was anxious to clothe Isabel somewhat differently, but she did not know just how to manage it. The conspicuous hat, the elaborate blouse, the jewelry—how could they be changed into something more suitable before her niece should encounter the critical and curious gaze of Bayport? And the hair! What could be done about the hair? It was Peggy who came to her rescue.

"I've had an idea," said she, presently. "Come stand in front of the window till I tell you about it. Oh, I hope you'll agree, Isabel, and you, too, Aunt Lyd, for it's the most perfect idea you ever heard

THE SECRET STAIRS

of. Do you see that blouse in the window? The white one? Well, it's just like one of mine. Isabel would look too sweet for words in it. And this is my idea. Let's begin right off to dress as much alike as we can! I've always wished I were a twin so that I could see how my clothes looked on somebody else. Now here's my chance. How do you feel about it, Isabel? Will you consent to be my twin? Oh, don't say you don't want to, for I simply couldn't bear it!"

"I should adore it," said Isabel. "I've always longed to be a twin, too. Isn't that strange?"

"It's wonderful! And we've come together at last. When is your birthday?"

"It has just gone by. I was fourteen on the sixteenth of September."

"It is simply too remarkable!" exclaimed Peggy. "I was fourteen on the tenth! We are really and truly exactly the same age. We must dress alike! What do you think of it, Aunt Lyd? Could we manage to look the least bit alike?"

Their aunt gazed at each girl in turn. "Your eyes are different, your noses are different, and, in fact, you are about as unlike in the face as any two girls of fourteen could be, but dress goes a long way in changing people's appearance, and as it seems you have both spent your fourteen years in longing for twin sisters, you had better try the plan and see how

"I'M PEGGY DUANE!"

it works out. But you dress now very differently. One of you will have to give up her way in order to be like the other. Which will be the one to give up?"

There was a moment's pause, a moment of suspense for Aunt Lydia. Then Isabel, with the slight gravity of manner which occasionally made her seem several years older than she was, said, as she looked at Peggy: "Why, me, of course, and I'll tell you why. Peggy is really six days older than I am, so she has the right to choose. Then, Peggy has got her clothes, and she most likely got 'em here. You see, mine came from New York or Chicago. Of course, you couldn't expect to find the latest New York fashions in Bayport, although it's a bigger place than I thought. If Peggy had come out West and agreed to be a twin, it might have been the other way around. I must say, if you don't mind my saying it, that I think that waist is very plain, and not awfully pretty either, but that's no matter. And I think it's real sweet of you, Aunt Lyd, to buy me any clothes at all the very first day you've laid eyes on me, and I thank you ever so much, and as long as you're getting them they ought to be the kind you like. I'm just crazy about the twin idea, so I'll agree to anything, even if it makes me look like a fright."

"Even——" began Peggy, "even"—and stopped for lack of courage. The most important point of

THE SECRET STAIRS

all, the way of doing her hair, must wait a little longer.

When their shopping was finished, Miss Lydia left them, for she had an engagement, and the two girls walked home, carrying the boxes and packages. Presently Isabel caught sight of Philip, dressed in white flannels, coming toward them. He was walking with a girl, and he was so much interested in what he was saying to her that he did not see his relatives until they were within speaking distance.

"Here comes Phil!" exclaimed Isabel, joyously. "And who is that girl?" she added in a different voice.

"Oh, that is Anne Pendleton," said Peggy; "otherwise known as 'the great and only Anne.'"

"That is what Jim Curtis called her. Why is she great and only?"

"Tell you later, if you don't find out for yourself," laughed Peggy. "Hullo, children! Where have you been? We've been shopping."

"So I should suppose," said Philip. "Look at their bundles! What on earth have you two been getting? Anne, this is Isabel. Forgot you hadn't met. Isabel, this is Anne Pendleton." Philip was embarrassed. He was ashamed of himself for doing so, but he wished with all his heart that Isabel were not wearing all those rings and bangles and things when Anne met her for the first time.

"I'M PEGGY DUANE!"

The two girls shook hands. Anne was sixteen, tall, slender, dressed in a summer costume of extreme simplicity, and she was exceedingly pretty. The hair under her sailor hat was golden and her eyes were the bluest that Isabel had ever seen. There was something about her, apart from her unusual height, that made Isabel feel small and childish. She understood at once why this friend of Philip's was called "the great and only Anne." In a few minutes the two walked on, and Isabel and Peggy carried their packages home. Isabel had become silent and it was not until they were in her room, trying on the new clothes, that she could respond to Peggy's friendly chatter.

"She doesn't like me, that 'great and only Anne,' " she thought. "And she's awfully stuck up. If she is the kind Phil admires, of course he won't like me, and I did so hope he was going to be very fond of me. He began to be last night, but to-day he looks sort of disapproving at me. Oh, dear, I wish the Rodneys weren't such a disapproving kind of a family!"

CHAPTER IX

BROTHER AND SISTER

A FEW days passed quickly by, and Isabel had already become somewhat accustomed to her new surroundings. Her aunts were very kind to her, she thought, each one in her own way. She loved her aunts Phœbe and Lydia, and her uncle was, she felt instinctively, her special friend, although she did not know why. Her Aunt Abby she did not understand in the least. She had never before met any one like her. She was glad that Aunt Abby was not the only aunt in her new home. Philip she already loved with all the devotion of her ardent nature. Although he was seldom at home, when he was there he was very nice to her. The day after she arrived he had taken her up to his room on the third floor and had shown to her his various treasures, and he had told her to use his books. He had taken her out sailing with Peggy Duane and Jim Curtis, and then, evidently thinking that he had done all that was required of him, he had returned to his

BROTHER AND SISTER

usual pursuits. Isabel decided that he must be a great favorite in Bayport, for he was so constantly invited to go somewhere.

Two trunks for Isabel had come from New York, and she had immediately unpacked one of them and had arranged some of her possessions in the large room which she occupied. She wanted to show a few of her pictures to Phil, especially the photograph of her mother which, in a large, highly-decorated silver frame, occupied a conspicuous position on the dressing table that faced the door. Thus far, however, she had had no opportunity, for Phil, when he was in the house, was always in a hurry.

Isabel had as yet met only a few of Philip's friends. Jimmy Curtis, of course, she felt that she knew well, but the many others who claimed so much of his time were still almost strangers to her. She wished to know them better, simply because they were his friends, and yet she dreaded seeing more of them. She had a certain impression that they were critical. There was some difference between her and these girls and boys who were on such a jolly, friendly footing, but she could not tell what it was. It made her uncomfortable. She longed to be like them and yet she scorned the idea of trying to change herself merely to suit the absurd ideas of these friends of Philip. Why should she? "Why am I not just as good as any of them?" she thought.

THE SECRET STAIRS

There was one girl in particular who aroused her resentment, for she felt that she was the most critical of all, and also the most intimate with Phil. This was Anne Pendleton.

"I know she doesn't like me!" thought Isabel hotly. "She is so superior! And she's so awfully neat-looking! Such hair—I can't bear her hair! Of course, it's beautiful, but I feel like rumpling it up. She must spend hours getting it so exactly fixed. I *hate* such tidy people!"

She had been thinking this when Phil unluckily decided that the moment had arrived for him to speak to Isabel on the subject of her own curly mop. He had waited until their intercourse had become firmly established on a brother-and-sister basis, but he decided that the proper time had now come. He did not like the way she "did" her hair, and, being her brother, who had a better right to tell her so? And he proceeded to do so the very next time he entered the house.

Isabel was quite unprepared for the attack. Phil had been so kind to her, had apparently been so un-critical of her, that she had taken it for granted that she was "quite all right" in his eyes, just as he was in hers. She admired everything about him. She considered him very handsome, he was clever, he was kind. He never seemed to lose his temper as she did hers, all too easily. He always did or

BROTHER AND SISTER

said the right thing at the right moment. He was sweet and gentle in his manner to all of his aunts, even including Aunt Abby. In short, Isabel had decided that her brother was absolutely perfect; and, of course, the awakening was bound to come. She was quite unprepared for the truth. Philip was very much like other boys, and precisely like the ordinary, everyday brother, who does not think it necessary constantly to assure his sister that, of course, he loves her. "That goes without saying!" the ordinary brother would declare. "Why do girls always expect you to keep telling them things they ought to know already?"

Isabel and Peggy Duane were coming down the old stairway in the Rodney house, the beautiful staircase with its carved balusters and newel post that were always reproduced in the Bayport guide-books. Isabel was dressed in her new clothes, but she had not as yet laid aside her rather large collection of rings, bangles and chains. She greeted her brother joyously.

"Oh, Phil!" she exclaimed, "I'm so glad you've come in, for I want you to see us. I'm going to Peggy's to lunch and I hoped you'd see us. Now we'll tell you our secret. It's perfectly thrilling. Do you notice anything about me different from what it has been?"

Philip cast a hasty glance over her from head to

THE SECRET STAIRS

foot. "Can't say I do," he observed. "What's up now?"

"Why, we've decided to act as if we were twins, and we almost are, you know, in our ages. Can't you see what we've done? Peggy suggested that we should dress alike, and we're going to, as far as we can manage it. I'm perfectly thrilled with the idea. Don't you think it's great?"

"Can't say you look much alike," said Philip, rather dubiously.

"Oh, we know that!" put in Peggy. "Isabel has a lovely nose, and mine is nothing but a pug, and Isabel has a mouth just half the size of mine, and there are a few other things which make her pretty, and me plain, but that's no matter!"

"Well," rejoined her cousin, "you are rather plain, Pegs, except when you're laughing and talking, but as you're doing that most of the time, no one ever stops to think whether you're pretty or not. I won't deny that your profile is not beyond criticism, but who cares about the shape of your nose as long as you continue to be old Pegs? But you two kids will never even begin to look like anything in the way of twins unless Isabel calls in those horrible excrescences over her ears. For goodness' sake, do away with them, Isabel! They'd make ugly the prettiest face in the world. Do you know what the general name for them is? They are——"

BROTHER AND SISTER

"Hush, Phil!" said Peggy, with a quick glance at Isabel's face. Then she added, before he had time to say more: "We haven't got to our hair yet, have we, Isabel? We've had a lot more important things to attend to."

"Well, you had better get busy, for it is the most important of all," said Phil, in a lordly and brotherly way as he passed them and went upstairs to his room. "Of course, we don't want all Bayport to be laughing at Isabel's hair if we can help it." And having said what he had to say, and again thinking how glad he was that Isabel had come, but omitting to mention it, he promptly forgot the whole matter. He and several of his friends were going to motor to another town for supper and a dance. Anne, of course, was to be one of the party, and it would be "great."

But Isabel did not forget it. She said nothing for a few minutes, but when she and Peggy were on their way through the gardens she stopped short. "Does he often talk like that?" she demanded.

"Phil? Of course! That's nothing, Isabel. Phil didn't mean anything."

"Yes, he did! He meant he didn't like the way I look. And he said that about your profile! He said you were plain when you weren't laughing!"

"But why shouldn't he? He is my cousin, and just like a brother. Who cares what he says?"

THE SECRET STAIRS

"You mean, Peggy Duane, that you don't mind his saying right out you weren't pretty?"

"Of course not! Why should I mind what Phil says? I tell you he is just like my own brother. Why should anybody care?"

"I care," said Isabel. "I am furious with Phil! I—I don't want to speak to him. He had no business to call me down that way about my hair, as if he knew everything. Just like that Anne Pendleton! She acted that way, too. As if she owned the whole earth and—and—oh, I just can't bear her!"

"That's a pity," said Peggy, quietly. She was not laughing now. On the contrary, her face was sober. She was surprised at Isabel's sudden, and it seemed to her, uncalled-for anger. "You will probably see a lot of her, for we are all together a good deal, though she is older than you and I are. But I don't see why you get so mad at her, for she doesn't come into it at all."

"Oh, yes, she does! I'm dead certain she has said something to Phil, and it's awfully provoking, for I did want him and me to be a real brother and sister."

Peggy suddenly resolved to meet the issue squarely. She had not received her nickname of "Square Pegs" for nothing. She turned and looked at Isabel. "If you don't mind my saying so, I think you would look a great deal nicer if you would do

BROTHER AND SISTER

your hair more like the way we do it here. You've got perfectly lovely hair, Isabel, and such lots of it. The way it curls up is perfectly fascinating. Do let me try it my way after lunch. And as for being 'real brother and sister' with Phil, that's just what he is! And you're the one who is going just the wrong way about it, for brothers and sisters always say things right out, like that. It wouldn't be a bit of fun if people in families always had to be awfully polite. I should simply pass away if I couldn't tell Phil exactly what I think of him sometimes. Phil isn't any more perfect than anybody else, but he's an old dear, and no mistake, and Anne is nice, too. And so are you, Isabel, only don't get mad over nothing! Here come the children, so look out! They notice everything."

Isabel had a quick temper—there was no denying it—but it was as quick to pass away as to come. She never harbored long her grievances, and in a few minutes she had recovered from the effect of her brother's remarks, and could enjoy the novel experience of having luncheon with a large family of young people. After a short period of staring, the younger children, who had already accepted her as a cousin, proceeded to treat her accordingly. It was not, however, until their mother had left them that the four opened fire. There was some consultation, and whispers of "you do it," "no, me!" and "I'm

THE SECRET STAIRS

the oldest, I will," ~~and~~ then, the four standing in a row in front of Isabel, they began. They were all out of doors on the porch, and the two older girls had been talking of their own affairs, and had not noticed the children. It was with some surprise, therefore, that Isabel looked up and again found four pairs of eyes, all brown and all expressive of great power of penetration, fixed steadily upon her. She had begun to hope that the staring stage was over.

"We want to ask you something," said Dorothy, the eldest. "Mother says we ought to be learning all the time. She says we ought to make the most of our minds, and there is something we've been anxious to find out ever since you came."

Peggy, from her intimate knowledge of her sister's questioning ability, gave a little gasp of dismay. Before she had time to intervene (she knew it would be of no use, however), Dorothy continued:

"We would like to ask you first if you are an American girl?"

"Why, of course!" said Isabel. "What do you take me for?"

"How perfectly silly you are, Dorothy!" said Peggy. "You know very well that Isabel is Phil's sister, and that her father was our uncle, and a brother of Uncle Charles and all the Rodneys. Don't ask such perfectly stupid questions. Mother

BROTHER AND SISTER

never meant you to do such things when she told you to use your minds. You are a rude child."

"Peggy, I know very well what I am," rejoined Dorothy, turning the grave and inquiring eyes for an instant upon her sister. "I am not rude. You are, because you're interrupting. Of course, I know Isabel's last name is Rodney. Of course, I know she is Phil's sister. But she has some other relations, hasn't she? Maybe her mother was Spanish, like her aunt, or she was an Italian, or a Bohemian, or a Czecho-Slovakian, or a——"

"Why, Dorothy, you really must stop talking this way!" commanded Peggy. "Mother wouldn't like it. You are hurting Isabel's feelings awfully."

"No, I'm not. I'm not hurting them at all. There must be some reason why she talks so differently from us, and so I thought her relations might be foreigners, and then we could try to Americanize her. You know in school we learned a lot last year about Americanizing the foreign-born—that's what they're all called—and teaching them how to be good Americans, and we'd all of us just love to Americanize Isabel. You have to be very kind, and take an interest, and help them with the language."

By this time Peggy's sense of humor had overcome that of politeness, and she was struggling not to laugh aloud. She knew that she ought to continue to reprove her sister, but the self-appointed Com-

THE SECRET STAIRS

mittee of Americanization was too much for her. A hasty glance at Isabel showed her, too, that she also was thus far only amused.

Isabel laughed with perfect good nature. "Well, if you kids aren't a scream!" said she. "If you'd lived out West you'd know a dago!"

"Oh, you mustn't call them dagos or wops!" exclaimed Dorothy, "or any name like that! That is just what you mustn't do. It hurts their feelings. But if you're not one yourself, why do you talk so queerly?"

"You've got me there! I wonder what's the matter with me, anyway? I don't seem to give great satisfaction."

"Yes, you do!" cried Peggy, very sober now. "I'm ashamed of everybody. I think we're perfectly hateful to you. I know that you think that we've done nothing but criticize you ever since you got here, and you're an angel to be so good-natured about it. Children, I wish you would all go away. I shall tell mother just how you have been behaving. It is perfectly outrageous of you to talk this way."

"If you tell mother you will be a tattletale. It's worse to be a tattletale than to ask questions," said Dorothy.

"I don't mind your questions," said Isabel, "but I'm going to ask a few myself. I'd like to know exactly why you think I'm a foreigner?"

BROTHER AND SISTER

"I'll tell you why," replied Dorothy. "There are a great many out West. I read it in a magazine or some place, so it must be true. Of course, everything printed in a magazine is true."

"Oh, no, it isn't!" interrupted Peggy.

"Peggy, will you kindly shut up?" said Dorothy. "Isabel and I are talking. There are whole towns of 'em, where they don't speak English at all. Now you speak English. We understand what you say all right, but you say it very queerly, so we thought maybe your Spanish aunt talked that way, and you had learned it from her, if you weren't one yourself."

"But my aunt isn't Spanish," said Isabel. "She is going to marry a Spaniard, but that doesn't make her one. She is just as much an American as you are, only she isn't a Yankee and she isn't a high-brow. She said you were all that on here, and I see now what she meant. Perhaps I do talk different from you people here. I don't say 'harf,' or 'carnt' or any of those silly things." Isabel had thus far held herself carefully in hand, but suddenly the steed of her temper broke loose. "But I'll just tell you this," she said. "I think you easterners are the most criticizing set of people I ever ran up against. If any of you had come out West to live with me, do you think I'd have set right to work before you'd been there a whole week to try to change you? You none

THE SECRET STAIRS

of you like me the way I am. You don't like my clothes, or my hair, or the way I talk, or anything. You—I'm dead sure, you don't like *me*, and I wish I didn't have to stay here! I know just what you all think me—common! Well, I don't care if you do! Peggy, you're the only one who is really nice to me, and—and your mother—and Uncle Charles and Aunt Lyd, and dear, darling Aunt Phœbe—and——”

But by this time she could say no more, for she was crying, and Peggy was comforting her; and then Mrs. Duane stepped out through the long window that opened upon the porch from her living room.

“I heard part of the conversation,” she said in her quiet way, “and I must say that my sympathies are entirely with Isabel. I feel very much ashamed of all my children except Peggy, and I am glad I happened to be near enough to hear just what took place. I will ask you four younger ones to go up to the nursery. I will come up presently.”

“But, Mother,” protested Dorothy, “that isn't fair. You told us always to ac—oc—ocquire knowledge if we could, and we were trying to ocquire it.”

“Go right upstairs, Dorothy, and don't try to use words you are too small for.”

“But, Mother——!”

“I wish you all to go upstairs.” And the four left the room.

“Isabel,” continued Mrs. Duane, “I am very sorry,

BROTHER AND SISTER

but, my dear, the children didn't really mean anything unkind, though they sounded very rude. But your family here are already getting truly fond of you. I have just come from there. You spoke of all of them but Aunt Abby and Phil as being nice to you, but Aunt Abby has just confided in me that she thinks you are such a very nice girl that she is very glad you have come to live here!"

"Oh, Aunt Margaret!" exclaimed Isabel, amusement shining through her tears.

"It is perfectly true, and we who know Aunt Abby so well, know it was a great deal for her to say."

"But Phil! He is the most important of all, for he is my brother, but he doesn't say he's glad!"

"Phil was just leaving the house as I went in," said Mrs. Duane. "He threw his arm around me—Phil and I are very good friends—and gave me one of his bear hugs, and this is what he whispered in my ear: 'Aunt Margaret, isn't it the greatest thing on earth that my little sister has come home to live? I feel quite set up, having a sister at last! I'm afraid she thinks I'm a good deal of a terror, though, for I simply hate the way she fixes her hair. She'd be a regular beauty if she'd only take a lesson from Peggy or somebody. But she's a corker, apart from that. A regular crackajack, and I'm as fond of her already as if she'd always lived here. I found out what she

THE SECRET STAIRS

was on the train the day she came, and I've grown awfully fond of her."

"Did Phil really say all that?" asked Isabel breathlessly. Her face was glowing now with tenderness and pleasure.

"He certainly did," said Mrs. Duane. "I have tried to repeat it in precisely his rather picturesque language."

There was a moment's silence. Isabel looked off across the garden. Peggy was about to speak, but her mother motioned to her to say nothing. Then presently Isabel turned to Mrs. Duane. "I'm real glad you told me that," she said. "I suppose I am sort of different from you all. I wish you would tell me things. I can stand being told things by you, and Peggy, for I know you won't cast slurs."

"What do you mean, dear, by that? Of course, we won't cast them, but who does?"

But Isabel did not answer directly. "Perhaps she won't again," she said. "Perhaps I was all wrong and she didn't mean it. Aunt Margaret, I'm sorry, if I was disagreeable. Perhaps after I get Aunt Clara's letter—I haven't heard a word from her since I got here—I'll—well, it will make me feel better. I'm kind of worried about Aunt Clara's letter. It wasn't very nice of me to run away from her, and, of course, she would be mad about it, especially as she is going to be married and wanted me to

BROTHER AND SISTER

be there. I think my Aunt Clara is more my aunt than anybody else, don't you? For she has taken care of me always, and I never knew until less than a month ago a thing about any of these relations here. How can they have thought that I would turn out to be like them? And then there's something else."

"Tell us if you can," said Mrs. Duane. "Peggy and I would love to help you."

"I know you would, but I can't very well tell you. At least, I don't think I've got any right to, until I'm sure. It's something so queer I think I must have been mistaken. I'll just wait, if you don't mind, until it happens again." And then Isabel's face cleared. "I suppose I'll go and say something queer, or put my foot in it somehow before I'm three minutes older," she added ruefully. "I don't seem able to help it."

"Well, I'll help you pull it out again!" laughed Peggy.

"And do go have a good time somewhere," said Mrs. Duane. "And don't worry any more."

CHAPTER X

MARY CHISHOLM

IT was the following morning, and Isabel was dressing to go down to breakfast. The day was beautiful, and the sun shone in at the eastern windows of her room, caught here and there by the polished mahogany of the four-post bed or the high chest of drawers, and gleaming on the silver frame in which was the photograph of her mother. As the girl stood before the dressing table, the bright sunbeams dancing on the picture attracted her attention to the face she loved so dearly, and she paused for an instant to look at it as she often did, and to speak to it in her heart as had always been her habit.

“Mother darling,” she thought, “I do wonder if you would have given in about your hair if they didn’t like the way you wore it? I just wonder. I do so hate to give in, and Aunt Clara used to tell me I was just like you that way, so maybe you didn’t like it any better. But you fixed your hair sweetly

MARY CHISHOLM

in that picture. I wonder how I'd look with mine that way? It's fearfully plain, just put back like that, but I'd love to do it the way you did. I mean to try!"

She seized her brush, and in a few minutes the change was accomplished. "Now what will they all say?" she thought. "Of course, they will think they made me do it, and it's really because I want to look more like Mamma. And I do! I really do look exactly like her."

And so thought her uncle when she entered the room where the family were at breakfast. He started slightly, but beyond his usual pleasant greeting he said nothing. A little smile was on Isabel's face as she glanced across the table at her brother. Being in a hurry, he had scarcely looked at her, but in a few minutes he raised his eyes. Then he put down his cup upon its saucer with a clatter which surprised and disturbed his aunt behind the coffee urn.

"If you aren't a peach!" he exclaimed, and his voice expressed his pleasure. "Isabel, I call it a mighty nice thing for you to do! And you look quite stunning with it that way. I declare, I'm proud to own such a good-looking sister! Do you see what she's done?"

They all looked at her. It was a bit embarrassing to have the eyes of the entire family turned upon

THE SECRET STAIRS

her. Involuntarily Isabel glanced at Aunt Abby, and she was just in time to catch the unmistakable expression of dismay that for the moment ruffled its calm. There was no doubt in Isabel's mind that Aunt Abby did not approve! What could be the reason, she wondered? Was there no pleasing her? It was very disappointing, but Phil's satisfaction made up for it, and Uncle Charles looked at her affectionately, as was his way at times. When he did so he was apt to say something funny immediately afterward, Isabel had noticed, as though he wished to hide his real feeling.

"Well done, Isabel!" he said. "You do look very nice indeed, my dear. Now it is your turn to begin to improve Phil. Are you perfectly satisfied with the way his hair was cut the last time, or can you suggest something better? Of course, he is ready to take your advice! And now about the set of his jacket? And that tie he is wearing this morning—how about it?"

"I believe I should like a blue one better," she answered with a little laugh. "He must have got up very early to get that so neatly tied!"

"Precisely what I was thinking myself! But, my dear child, you have said just the wrong thing about the color! No self-respecting fellow, working hard to pass his Harvard exams, would demean himself by wearing a Yale necktie!"

MARY CHISHOLM

Phil laughed with them. He did not mind a little teasing and he often had it from Uncle Charles. Isabel was growing very fond of her uncle. His quiet dignity, combined with his readiness for a bit of fun, made him very charming, for she had never known anything just like it. Her Aunt Clara frequently laughed loud and long at stories which Isabel had seldom thought were in the least amusing, but the Rodney form of humor, strongly developed in them all with the exception of Miss Abby, was entirely different. Isabel came to the conclusion that Aunt Abby was probably too much occupied with her affairs to indulge in amusement. She managed the household, she was interested in many good works outside of her home, and she was constantly engaged in writing letters to the *Boston Transcript* on various subjects. She was a busy woman.

Philip was to go to boarding school this autumn for the first time. He had a year to fill in before entering Harvard and it had been decided to send him to a school in another state. He departed the first of October with Jim Curtis, who was at the same school, and he left behind him a large hole in the family life. Isabel felt as if she could hardly wait for Thanksgiving to come, which would bring him home for a few days. Her own education had been much discussed. The advantages of boarding schools had been carefully considered by Miss Rod-

THE SECRET STAIRS

ney, but as she remarked to her sisters, two things decided her in favor of a school in their own town.

"It is too late to enter her at any boarding school where we would care to have her go," she said, "and I think she needs the influence of a home, and of just such a home as ours, here in Bayport, surrounded by the best kind of people, and coming in contact only with what is good."

"My dear Abby!" murmured her sister Phœbe, in whose room the conversation took place. "Is it possible that you think our dear old Bayport possesses only what is good? And would it be well for Isabel to meet nothing else?"

Miss Abby's rather large face lost for a moment its placid expression of perfect satisfaction. "Sister," she exclaimed anxiously, "you are getting nervous! We had better leave you to be quiet. It was thoughtless of Lydia and me to discuss such an important matter as Isabel's education here in your room. I can only say in answer to your question, about Bayport, that I consider our family remarkably fortunate always to have had our home here, and I look upon Isabel as a brand snatched from the burning. If she had not had the good fortune to come to Bayport before it was too late, think what she might have become! Come, Lydia! Phœbe is certainly getting nervous. I am going out right away to see if Miss Dinsmore will take her—if she

MARY CHISHOLM

can take her! She may not have a vacancy, it is so late. If I had not been so busy with Philip's outfit I should have attended to it before."

All this time Isabel had been waiting with some impatience to learn what her fate was to be. Having always longed to go to boarding school, she rather hoped that her wish was to be granted at last. On the other hand, she really enjoyed her life in the family. She was adapting herself to it easily, and except for a feeling of shyness with the Bayport girls which still lingered, she already felt that she was at home there. Peggy Duane was a pupil at Miss Dinsmore's school, which was another reason for wishing to go there; but so also was Anne Pendleton, and also a girl named Mary Chisholm, whom Isabel had not yet met, for she had been away from Bayport for several months. For some unknown reason Isabel had thought much about this Mary Chisholm, and rather dreaded meeting her.

The Dinsmore School had opened, for a week or so of October had now passed, but the question of Isabel's attendance was still unsettled. There was a possibility of a vacancy, and in that case Miss Dinsmore would be glad to receive her, but she would not know until the middle of October.

One Saturday morning Isabel was with Peggy in the Duane's library when the telephone bell rang. Peggy answered it, and this was what Isabel heard:

THE SECRET STAIRS

"Oh, you dear darling, have you really come home at last?"

"Oh," thought Isabel, "it must be that Mary Chisholm!"

"How perfectly wonderful!" continued Peggy. "I should just love to come. . . . I think so. . . . Yes, I'll ask her. She's right here now. Oh, I'm so glad you've come home, Mary! You hold the line a minute and I'll ask her. It's Mary Chisholm, Isabel," said Peggy, excitedly turning to her. "She's been trying to get you at the Rodneys'. She wants us to come to supper to-night. It is going to be only some girls, quite a lot of us, I think—and, of course, you'll go. I'll tell her so."

"Wait, wait, Peggy!" exclaimed Isabel, in an agonized whisper. "I can't go! Make up some excuse, do anything! I—I'm awfully afraid of Mary Chisholm!"

"Goose!" was Peggy's only comment. Then she turned again to the telephone. "Of course she'll come, Mary! She thanks you very much and—of course, we'll both come. Good-by! You are a perfect goose, Isabel! Afraid of old Mary! Wait till you know her. You put me in an awful hole. I couldn't say you'd come with pleasure, or any nice little polite speech, but Mary wouldn't care. She's not that kind."

"Is she at all like Anne Pendleton?" asked Isabel.

MARY CHISHOLM

Her face expressed such anxiety that Peggy broke into laughter.

"How perfectly killing! That is simply the funniest thing I ever heard of! Mary like Anne! Wait till you see them together. There couldn't be two girls more different than Mary and Anne, although they are own cousins."

"Oh, I suppose so!" sighed Isabel, feeling more and more dejected. "I knew you would say she was somebody's cousin, and, of course, it is Anne Pendleton's! Everybody in Bayport is cousin to everybody else, except me. Of course, you Duanes are awfully nice about that and let me call you my cousins, but after all you're not my really truly own. Even Phil isn't my whole brother! He's only half a one. I suppose all of you being related to each other is what makes it so hard."

"Hard? How do you mean?"

"Oh, it is what gives me a sort of feeling that—that—I don't exactly like to say it, for you have been such a darling, Pegsie, that I don't feel that way a bit about you."

"But do please tell me what you mean. It sounds so interesting."

"Oh, I have a sort of feeling as if the rest of the Bayport people were very nice and civil to me and all that, because my name happens to be Rodney, but as if you—they—were all gathered together in some

THE SECRET STAIRS

place like a garden or something, with high walls all around, just like the Bayport gardens, and they were perfectly willing to have me or any other stranger climb up and sit on the top of the wall and look at them, and that was all. As if they would never be willing to have me come down on the inside!"

"That is very interesting," said Peggy, somewhat thoughtfully. "That never would have entered my head, but then I am not in the least clever. It means a lot. I wonder if we do live behind a wall? Don't you think that very likely any set of people do in any place?"

"Not out West," said Isabel quickly. "I think—oh, no matter. You don't live behind one yourself. At least you're there, all right, but you're perfectly willing to have me come climbing over."

"You dear!" exclaimed Peggy. "Well, Mary will be willing, too. You just see if she isn't. And we'll both stretch up our arms and help you down on our side of it!"

"I'll probably tumble and make an awful mess of everything, trying to get over!" And, of course, they both laughed, and then Isabel returned to the subject of the supper party, which was of immense importance.

"Where does she live?" she asked. "In one of the grandest old houses? When Uncle Charles took

MARY CHISHOLM

me sightseeing one day he pointed out a great big one and called it the old Chisholm house. Oh, dear, when I go into your big houses here I feel so small! I never felt so small in my life as I have since I came to Bayport. Great high ceilings everywhere, and huge pictures of old ancestors looking at you, and four-post bedsteads everywhere, and sideboards and things! My, it's awfully frightening, Peggy! You don't know how tiny it makes me feel."

Peggy, of course, shouted with laughter. It always amused her to listen to Isabel when she was in this mood, for she made such remarks in a whimsical way, half in earnest and half in fun.

"You are certainly the most killing person I ever knew!" exclaimed Peggy.

"But was that the Chisholms' house?" persisted Isabel. "If it was, I simply can't go."

"Well, then, it wasn't! It used to be ages ago, and it is always called the old Chisholm house, but—oh, they don't live there now, and that is all I'm going to tell you. You've just got to wait and see for yourself to-night. I'm going to have some fun out of it."

"What in the world do you mean, Pegs?"

"Never mind what! I tell you, I'm going to have some fun. Prepare for the worst!"

It was all that Isabel could get her to say, and Peggy, quickly passing the word around among the

THE SECRET STAIRS

two families that she intended to surprise Isabel and they would please answer no questions about Mary Chisholm, she was obliged to spend the day in some suspense.

"Of course, they are probably in a bigger house even than the one I saw that day," said Isabel.

But Peggy only laughed.

They were invited to supper at seven o'clock and at about a quarter before the hour the two girls left the Rodneys' house. Ned Duane, Peggy's older brother, was with them, for Miss Rodney declared that it was out of the question for the girls to walk alone "at that hour," to the part of Bayport where the Chisholms lived. Isabel supposed, therefore, that it was well out of the city, quite in the country, probably, or toward the sea, and no doubt remained in her mind now that she was right in guessing it to be "the grandest house yet."

"It is quite a little way from here," Peggy admitted, "but it is too provoking that Aunt Abby couldn't let us escape without some one going with us. Her old-fashioned ideas are too funny, aren't they? Because she had a maid go with her when she went out to supper when she was young, she thinks we ought to. And it isn't seven o'clock yet! However, if Ned can bear it, we can. It is lucky for us he was willing, or she would have insisted on one of the maids tagging along."

MARY CHISHOLM

"Is this the way we go?" asked Isabel, as they turned into a very narrow street, in which the houses were small, and which was not particularly well paved nor in any way attractive.

"Yes, ma'am!" laughed Peggy. "I know my way pretty well to Mary Chisholm's. Now we turn down here."

Isabel was still somewhat afraid of Peggy's brother Ned. He was twenty, and at Harvard. Peggy had told her impressively when she first came that he was a Junior, and when she met him she was awed by his manner. It was evident at once that he looked upon her as a very young child, and she was rather glad that he appeared in Bayport only for an occasional Sunday. He did not talk much now, being apparently absorbed in his own deep thought.

Having turned once more into another street, narrower and quieter than any through which they had yet walked, the Duanes stopped before the door of a square, plain house. The light from a street lamp shone upon its entrance and disclosed a double door, leading to a sort of vestibule. Edward Duane opened this door for the girls to go in. Then he raised his hat courteously, bade them a somewhat severe good-by, and walked briskly away. To Isabel's astonishment, Peggy pressed a button in a row of similar buttons marked with the visiting cards

THE SECRET STAIRS

of the residents of the house, and then placed her ear at a speaking tube above the card. In a moment the latch of the inner door clicked, and Peggy led the way up two long flights of stairs. Instead of the large and beautiful house which Isabel had pictured in her imagination as the home of Mary Chisholm, she found her living in an apartment house in which there was not even an elevator. As they reached the third floor a door opened. A bright light shone out into the dim hall and the sound of laughter and the chatter of girls' voices was heard from within. On the threshold stood a young girl, who was as tall as Anne Pendleton but who was entirely unlike her in appearance, for her hair and eyes were very dark, and her features were plain.

"Oh, I'm so glad to meet you at last!" she said cordially, as she held out a welcoming hand to Isabel. "I've heard a lot about you. Every girl in Bayport has written me about Phil Rodney's sister and what they said has made me quite crazy to meet you. Hullo, Pegsy! Oh, it's good to be home again and see you all!"

So this was Mary Chisholm! Isabel, susceptible to the voice, thought hers the friendliest she had heard in Bayport, not even excepting Peggy's.

CHAPTER XI

SUPPER AT THE CHISHOLMS'—AND OTHER THINGS

A LONG passageway, too narrow to be called a hall, led from the front door of the Chisholms' flat to a room at the other end. To judge from the noise and chatter they made, a number of girls were already there, and as Isabel followed Peggy into a small bedroom to lay aside her hat and coat, her heart sank. Although she had traveled much with her aunt, Mrs. Todd, and had often met strangers, she had never before felt any shyness. They had usually been older people, to be sure, and with them she was more at ease. A crowd of girls and boys of her own age she found almost terrifying. Even after several weeks in Bayport, and although she had become acquainted with most of the girls, she was still frightened at the prospect of meeting several of them together. It was, therefore, a silent and trembling Isabel who followed Peggy, when Mary led the way to the living room at the front.

THE SECRET STAIRS

Five girls were grouped about the piano, where one of them, Elizabeth Greene, was seated. She strummed upon it at intervals some bit of chorus or popular air which the girls would hum, breaking off into laughter and talk as suddenly as they began to sing. They greeted the newcomers cordially, and continued their chatter, Peggy at once becoming absorbed into the group. Peggy was usually in the center of things without any effort on her part. Always ready to laugh and have a jolly time, she never was in the least self-conscious, but at the same time she forgot others as well as herself, and it did not occur to her now that Isabel's case was in any way different from hers. She forgot entirely their conversation about "the walled garden," which had impressed her so deeply when it took place that same afternoon, and calmly left Isabel to climb over the wall as best she could. To be sure, Mary and Isabel were talking together for a few minutes, and Peggy did not notice that presently Isabel was left alone.

"I must go help mother put supper on the table now," said Mary, in her friendly way. "We don't keep any maid, you know, so mother and I do most of it. Just excuse me for a minute, and then supper will be ready. Don't expect much in the way of supper, though," she added, laughing. "I hope Peggy prepared you for the worst! We only have a kitchenette and a chafing dish."

SUPPER AT THE CHISHOLMS'

She was gone for about ten minutes, but to Isabel it seemed at least a half hour. She sat by a table with a lamp on it, and looked at the backs of the girls as they bent over the book of songs, or teased one another, or gossiped gayly. She glanced about the room, which, though not large, was very attractive. The furniture was similar to all that she had seen in Bayport, and, of course, there were some old pictures on the walls. She was just a bit tired of those old oil paintings. It seemed to her that the ancestors of the present Bayportians must have spent most of their time and their money in sitting for their portraits, and they all looked exactly alike to her.

It was Anne Pendleton who discovered her sitting there alone. "Won't you come and sing?" she asked her, with the manner of aloofness that Isabel found so irritating.

"Oh, thanks!" replied Isabel, her shyness making her speak in a shrill tone, and thus emphasizing the contrast between her way of speech and Anne's. "I'm not much on singing."

"I'm afraid that none of us are!" said Anne. Then, as Isabel did not leave her seat, she moved apart from the other girls and took a chair near her. "Are you interested in—in——" She picked up at random a book which lay upon two or three others on the table, wondering what she could talk about

THE SECRET STAIRS

to this queer, impossible girl. "Are you at all interested in 'Old New England Houses'?"

"No, I'm not!"

"No, thanks!" replied Isabel, her shyness making the book. Isabel's reply was given so emphatically that it seemed to close the subject forever, and Anne wondered what she could say next, but Isabel herself continued it.

"Well," said she, "I'm not used to so many old things, and I get kind of tired of them. Everything is nice and new out West."

Then she, too, relapsed into silence, and Anne's aloof manner became more marked. Isabel said to herself that she could not bear Anne Pendleton, she was "so stuck up." She did not suspect that Anne, anxious to be kind, was wishing with all her heart that she could think of something in which Isabel would be interested. The Bayport girls had all, with the exception of Peggy, decided that Phil's sister was "too queer for words." They tried to be nice to her on Phil's account, but it was hard work, they said. Unfortunately it had not occurred to one of them that it was even harder for Isabel.

The two sat in silence until Mary returned to the room and asked them to come to the supper table. She drew Isabel's hand through her arm and led the way.

"You are the guest of honor," she said, "and so

SUPPER AT THE CHISHOLMS'

you will sit next to me. Anne, please take mother's seat at the other end. Isabel, you'll think us a dreadful sort of family, for you'll think I'm making that precious mother of mine do all the work, but we take it turn about. When she has her friends to supper, I'm the kitchen maid! But I want you to meet her right away. Mother darling, here's Isabel Rodney," she added, leading Isabel around a high Japanese screen that hid the entrance to the tiny kitchen.

Mrs. Chisholm put down the dish that was in her hands and held them out to the girl. Then she stooped and kissed her. "I should have known you anywhere, Isabel Rodney! Has any one told you that you are the image of your mother?"

"Uncle Charles has," said Isabel. A tender expression came into her eyes. "Did you know Mamma?"

"Of course I did! We'll talk about her together some day. Your father was a dear friend of mine, too. I'm glad you have come here to live, my dear."

Isabel took her seat at the table feeling somewhat more at ease than she would have thought possible a little while before, and for a time she smiled happily when the others laughed, although she did not understand many of their jokes and allusions, for they were all about local affairs. Mary was occupied with the supper, and occasionally left the table to take something from her mother. On Isa-

THE SECRET STAIRS

bel's other side was Elizabeth Greene, the girl who had been at the piano. Peggy was up at the other end, sitting next to Anne and on the same side as Isabel, so she did not see her. They were all talking at once, but that seemed to make no difference in their appreciation of what was being said, for they shouted with laughter together, apparently at most amusing bits of conversation. Anne Pendleton was more quiet, but she laughed, too. Only Isabel was out of it, and as it is not easy to keep upon one's face an expression of interest if one does not understand what is being said, hers grew rather sober.

Presently Mary noticed this, and on her next trip to the kitchenette she consulted her mother.

"Isabel is as quiet as a mouse, and as solemn as an owl!" she said. "She isn't saying a word, and she looks as if she might begin to cry at any minute, Mother! No one seems to be saying a word to her. What had I better do about it?"

"You must stay there and draw her in, Mary, of course! I have always told you that you girls are very careless in that way. The child is a perfect stranger among you all. Hurry back and do your best, my dear. I'll attend to everything now."

Mary's efforts were soon rewarded, for she made Isabel forget her shyness and talk naturally, and when supper was over and they returned to the living room she had a chance to give Peggy a hint; and a

SUPPER AT THE CHISHOLMS'

little later Isabel's hour of triumph came in an unlooked-for manner.

"Now we're all going to do stunts," announced Mary. "Everybody here who can do anything at all has got to do it for the general good, whether they want to or not!"

"It wouldn't be for the general good for me to do anything!" laughed Elsie Farnham. "You would all pass away before I was half through. You know you're always bored stiff."

"No, we're not!" they all exclaimed. "Give your little song and dance, Elsie!"

Elsie "went ahead" forthwith, and although she had scarcely any voice she sang the funny words with such spirit and danced so gracefully at the close of each verse that one forgot to criticize the voice. Isabel grew more and more interested as each girl in turn responded to Mary's summons, and stepping to the space which they had cleared, at one end of the room, gave something in the way of entertainment. Peggy and Elizabeth Greene danced a clog dance together, keeping it up until they both fell exhausted on the sofa, amid the loud applause of the audience. Even Anne Pendleton, much to Isabel's surprise, unbent sufficiently to give an impersonation of a concert singer, with Elizabeth Greene as accompanist. Isabel enjoyed it all so much, and forgot her shyness so completely, that when Mary

THE SECRET STAIRS

turned to her and asked her what she could do, she replied, "I can do a monologue."

"A monologue!" they all shouted. "Isabel Rodney, can you give a *monologue*? Step right up to the front and begin!"

"Isabel, you never told me!" cried Peggy reproachfully. "You've kept it a secret! How could you?"

"Don't stop to scold her, Pegs," said Anne. "We want to hear it." Then she turned to Isabel. "Do please give it, Isabel," she said. "Not one of us has ever done that sort of thing."

Isabel, pleased by this request from the stately Anne, but trembling inwardly at her own daring, took the place that served as stage. Then, not venturing to glance at the amazed Peggy, nor indeed at any of the laughing, interested faces gathered in front of her, she began.

Isabel had been quite sure the moment she confessed that she could give a monologue that every word of it would pass from her memory, and she should only disgrace herself forever in the eyes of these critical Bayport girls, but she had a talent for acting and an excellent memory. She had once heard some one in the West give monologues, and soon afterward, coming across one published in a magazine, she had studied it, and one day had astonished her Aunt Clara and some of her friends by reciting

SUPPER AT THE CHISHOLMS'

it. After that she had committed several to memory, for she had searched the back numbers of magazines to find them. The one she chose for her first recitation in Bayport was so amusing and she did it so well that at its close the girls crowded around her, clamoring for another.

"You are perfectly wonderful!" said they. "I entirely forgot you were Isabel Rodney and just thought you were that woman shopping! Why, we could *see* the elevator she got into, and the other people pushing her, and everything! You've simply got to give us another!"

It was impossible when the evening came to an end to feel any longer that she was a stranger among them, for, after all, it had only needed a little mutual understanding to break the ice. As time went on Isabel grew into the jokes and allusions that had at first seemed to be another language, and the Bayport girls, on their part growing to like her and wishing to be kind when they stopped to think about it, widened their circle sufficiently for her to feel that she was really "across the wall and in the garden." Therefore, when she began to go to school the ordeal was not as great as she had feared.

The vacancy had occurred, and Miss Dinsmore, about the first of November, received her into the time-honored institution known to all Bayport as "The Dinsmore School." Her education in the past

THE SECRET STAIRS

had been so interrupted that she was in some studies behind the girls of her age, while in others she showed such natural aptitude that she could easily have gone beyond her class. She had ambition, and she determined to work hard to keep in the class with Peggy even in the branches in which she was deficient. Her uncle, pleased with her intelligence, offered to help her, and the two in working together grew into terms of intimate comradeship which both enjoyed.

One letter, written weeks after Isabel left New York, had come to her from the former Mrs. Todd. In a way it relieved Isabel's mind of something that had been a real sorrow to her. She had been afraid that she had offended her aunt past forgiveness, but, although at first Mrs. Todd had been too angry to write, the desire to tell Isabel all about her new position had produced the letter. It was written about two weeks after the wedding, and after two pages of scolding, the new *Marchesa* passed from wrath to rejoicing, and gave a reassuring picture of peace and happiness. She and her husband were to sail some time in November for their "castle in Spain," and rather than leave America without forgiving her niece she had decided to write to her. Isabel answered the letter at once, and in a way so gratifying to her aunt that another letter had come from her, written just before she was to sail, and in

SUPPER AT THE CHISHOLMS'

this she suggested that they should continue to correspond. Isabel felt quite happy now about her Aunt Clara, and was able to settle down to her new life at school with that anxiety gone, she hoped, forever.

Thanksgiving Day drew near, and great preparations for it were in progress. Miss Abby's mind was so much occupied with mincemeat and the price of turkeys that there was little room for her usual affairs. Her sister Phœbe was left at liberty to come downstairs earlier in the day if she felt like doing so, and to stay later in the evening with her family without advice to the contrary from Abby, while Lydia took the opportunity to go and come as she pleased. Isabel, conscious of a sense of freedom, decided one Friday afternoon to carry out a plan to which Aunt Abby had given a reluctant consent.

The Rodney house consisted of three stories, with an attic above. There was an L at the back of the house, in which were the servants' quarters, the laundry, and the storerooms. Philip had a large room on the third floor, and across the hall from his was one that was now seldom used. When her Aunt Lydia took Isabel over the house one day she had told her that this empty room had once been occupied by her mother.

"By Mamma?" exclaimed Isabel. "Did Mamma ever live here?"

THE SECRET STAIRS

"No," said her aunt, somewhat reluctantly. "She never lived here, but she made us a visit. This was a guest room then."

"Was it after she was married?"

"No, it was before."

"When she was engaged to Papa, I suppose."

Her aunt made no reply. As if to change the subject, she opened the door of the room next the one they were in, which seemed to be used as a store-room.

"There is something quite unusual here," she said. "Has any one told you the secret of this room?"

"What do you mean, Aunt Lyd?"

"Only that the secret staircase opens into this room."

"What secret staircase? What can you mean?"

Miss Lydia touched a part of the wall close to the fireplace. Immediately a small opening appeared, which she made larger by pushing the panel that had been slightly displaced. There was now an opening large enough for one of them to pass through. Isabel peered into it and saw a very narrow stairway, winding and steep, leading apparently to the floor below.

"We are quite proud of our secret stairs," said her aunt. "They were put in when the house was built. You know this part of it has been standing since before the Revolution. There are only a few

SUPPER AT THE CHISHOLMS'

secret staircases or passages left in New England, but there are two or three, right here in Massachusetts."

"Why, Aunt Lyd, it's the most thrilling thing I ever heard of!" cried Isabel. "I didn't know there were such things anywhere in this country. It sounds like an old castle, or dungeons and things. Do please tell me more about it! Where does it come out? Can we go down it?"

"Oh, yes, it is perfectly possible, but you had better wait until Phil comes home. He will be delighted to show it to you. It comes out in the old kitchen, where the big brick oven is."

"But what was it ever used for?"

"I suppose in case they should ever want to escape. You know people had some funny ideas in those days. Not so long ago, either, did they think of such things, for your Aunt Abby took great comfort in the thought of those stairs during the Spanish War! When everybody was afraid that the Spanish fleet would sail into Bayport harbor and take us all prisoners, dear Aunt Abby suggested escape by way of the secret stairs!"

A few days after this Miss Abby herself volunteered to show her niece the attic. This was shut off from the rest of the house by a door at the foot of a short, steep flight of stairs. This door was always kept closed, and as Isabel followed her aunt to

THE SECRET STAIRS

the sacred precincts above, she sniffed for the first time in her life the curious, indefinable odor of an old New England attic—that peculiar mixture of soap, cedar chests, camphor and antiquity always to be found in one.

“These chests are filled with old-fashioned things which have come down in the family,” said Miss Rodney. “Of course, some of the best-preserved we gave to the Bayport Museum. You saw them when your uncle took you sightseeing. But we have a great deal left and some day I will show them to you.”

It was at that minute, up in the attic, that Isabel suddenly found the courage to make to her aunt the request that she had had in mind since the day her Aunt Lydia showed her the secret stairs.

“Aunt Abby, I am going to ask a great favor of you,” she said.

“What is it? To show you these things now? I really haven’t time.”

“Not that at all; but I do wish you would let me move up into the empty room on the same floor with Phil’s. Come down there now and show it to me again! Aunt Lyd took me in there, and I would so love to have it for mine!” They went down to the third floor and Miss Abby opened the door of the coveted room.

“Oh, I wish I could have it, Aunt Abby!” said

SUPPER AT THE CHISHOLMS'

Isabel boldly. "I should just love to have it! Couldn't I come up here? Oh, please let me! And you said the room I had was really the guest room. Do let me have this one instead!"

Miss Abby hesitated, though it was evident that the idea met with some favor. "It might be a good plan," she said. "I won't say no, but I must think it over. I am afraid it isn't warm enough in winter. The furnace doesn't come up here. Phil has an open fireplace, but you would have to use this little stove, and the trouble of carrying wood is bad enough now. No, Isabel, I cannot ask the choreman or either of the maids to do it."

"I'll carry it up myself, Aunt Abby! I'd just love to do it. And, besides, I like to be cold. I hate a hot room. Please, please let me move up here!"

"Well, in a week or so, perhaps," said Miss Abby, yielding at last. "I will have the room cleaned. I cannot imagine why you wish to leave a comfortable room on the second floor, where everything is nice, and come up to this cold room so far away from all of us, except when Philip is at home."

"I don't mind that in the least, and I do hope you will let me move before he gets here. It will be fun to surprise him. Thank you, Aunt Abby, for saying I can do it. You are awfully good to me."

"I haven't yet said you could, and I hope I am

THE SECRET STAIRS

not 'awfully' anything. You young people use that word entirely too much," was her aunt's austere reply.

Isabel had been about to give as another reason for her desire for this room, the fact that her mother had once occupied it, but she had found that this aunt never willingly mentioned her mother. She said to herself now that Aunt Abby was probably going to let her move without that additional reason, and so she would say no more at present. She did not even speak of having seen the secret stairs. Those secret stairs were another reason for wishing to have the upper room. She had talked with Peggy, and Peggy had suggested the usefulness of the stairs if any fun were on foot. "But keep very quiet about that!" had been Peggy's warning. "Aunt Abby is very funny about those stairs! She—oh, you'd better be wary, Isabel!"

The conversation between Isabel and her aunt had taken place before the Thanksgiving preparations were begun. A few days later, urged on by Peggy, who longed for the excitement of moving Isabel, she asked again if she might settle herself in her new room before Phil came home.

"It will be such fun to be all fixed up there when he gets here," urged Isabel. "Oh, Aunt Abby, do please let me!"

In the family council held that evening on the

SUPPER AT THE CHISHOLMS'

question, her uncle and her other two aunts united in trying to persuade Miss Rodney to allow her niece to have her way in this matter, and she finally yielded a somewhat reluctant consent.

"Oh, thank you a thousand times, Aunt Abby!" exclaimed Isabel, joyously, and forgetting her previous caution in regard to mentioning her mother. "I can't tell you how happy it makes me! To think I should have for my very own a room my darling Mamma ever was in! It is too wonderful!"

A silence fell upon the family group. Then: "Who told you that?" asked Miss Rodney.

"I did, Abby!" replied Lydia bravely.

"And—and—did you tell her about the secret stairs?"

"I showed them to her."

"That was all?"

"Yes, that was all."

Miss Abby said nothing for a moment. Then she turned to Isabel. "You may have the room, as I have promised. But you must do your own moving, and that not until the room has been thoroughly cleaned. I will have that done next week as soon as the washing and ironing are over, so you see it can't be cleaned until Wednesday, and after that the maids will be too busy to help you in any way. I hope you will be very careful, and not drop things going upstairs. It would disturb your aunt Phœbe

THE SECRET STAIRS

very much to hear things being dropped. It is your bedtime now, Isabel. Good-night!"

The girl bade them all good-night and went up to her room. What was the mystery about her mother? And how was it connected with the secret stairs? Evidently there was something of which she had never been told. She determined some day, in some way, to find out.

CHAPTER XII

CINDERELLA, AND HER NEW ROOM

“**P**EGGY, where are you? I must tell you something right away! Are you upstairs?”

Isabel stood in the large, square hall at the Duanes' house, calling in excited tones, but there was no answer from Peggy. Presently Dorothy appeared from somewhere at the back. “She's not home,” she announced.

“Oh, where is she?” Isabel's voice expressed her keen disappointment. “Have you any idea where she's gone?”

“Course I have!” said Dorothy importantly. “I know very well. If you'll tell me why you want her in such a hurry, I'll tell you where she is. Not unless, though!”

“Oh, Dorothy! You certainly are a most provoking child! We're just wasting time. Do hurry up and tell me! There is no time to lose.”

“Wasting it yourself,” said Dorothy calmly. “You get awfully excited, Isabel, don't you? What's

THE SECRET STAIRS

up now? You tell me, and I'll tell you. Bargain. See?"

"Oh, well, then, I'm going to move, and I need Peggy very much. Where is she?"

"Going to move? Where to? Are you going back to the West? Oh, maybe you're going to Spain to live with your Spanish aunt!"

"Dorothy Duane, I—I feel like giving you—Dorothy, you said it was a bargain and you're not telling me. Of course, I'm not going west or east, or anywhere! I'm going to move up to the third story and Pegs said she would help me. Now where is she, you terrible child?"

"I'm eleven, and I think you ought to say girl instead of child," was Dorothy's dignified reply, "but I made a bargain so, *of course*, I'll keep it! Peggy and mother have gone to the Chisholms'. There is something going on, but I can't find out exactly what it is. I think it has something to do with you and the secret stairs, but I am not sure. You see, they think I'm too young to know anything, and instead of that I know a heap more than they think I do!"

"Me and the secret stairs?" repeated Isabel, astonished. "Why, what can you mean, Dorothy? I never knew there were any secret stairs in the house until just a few days ago, so how could they have anything to do with me? And why should Peggy and your mother go to the Chisholms' about it?"

CINDERELLA, AND HER NEW ROOM

Why, what perfect nonsense! I believe you're making it all up, you're so crazy to find out things."

"Very well, Isabel Rodney, you just wait and see! And if I were making it up, there wouldn't be anything to find out, would there? So there now!"

Isabel, in spite of her annoyance and her mystification, had to acknowledge that there was a flaw in her argument, and she laughed so good-naturedly that peace was at once restored, but she was still puzzled. She turned to go home again just as Peggy came into the house alone.

"Oh, here you are, Pegs! Dorothy said you had gone to the Chisholms'," was Isabel's greeting.

"I only walked over there with mother," said Peggy. "What's up? You and Dot both look rather wild-eyed."

"Isabel is very excited," said Dorothy primly. "I never saw such an excitable girl. She wants you to help her move."

"Really?" cried Peggy. "Is Aunt Abby going to let you do it to-day?"

"She isn't very keen on it, but I begged her so hard and I told her you would help me, so she said I could, and I came over to get you. I do so want to get all settled there before Phil comes home, and that is to-morrow, you know. Can you come in now, Pegs? We've got to be fearfully quiet on account of Aunt Phœbe. We've got to creep about, and not

THE SECRET STAIRS

drop anything on the stairs—oh, I'm stuffed with directions! But she said I could do it, and I asked if you could help me and she said you could."

"I'll come, too," said Dorothy. "I'd love to help, and I'll forgive you entirely for what you said, Isabel."

"Very kind of you, but Aunt Abby said no one was to do it but Peggy," replied Isabel, promptly. "She was very particular. I asked her if I could get Mary Chisholm if Peggy couldn't do it, and she said, 'not on any account!' She was very decided."

"Of course, she wouldn't let Mary Chisholm!" said Peggy quickly. Then she stopped abruptly.

"Why not? Doesn't she like Mary?"

"Oh, yes. Of course the Chisholms are old friends," replied Peggy, rather lamely. "Every one likes Mary. Still, I hardly think she would let her."

"How funny! But come along, Pegs, for I'm wild to get at it. Much obliged to you, Dot! Sorry I can't avail myself of your kind offer."

"You're not sorry," observed Dorothy. "You're only being extra polite."

But the two older girls did not stop for further conversation with Dorothy. They hurried through the two gardens and were soon hard at work in Isabel's room.

"Have you always known about the secret stairs,

CINDERELLA, AND HER NEW ROOM

Pegs?" asked Isabel, suddenly, as she bent over one of her bureau drawers.

"Of course! Every one knows about them. They are quite celebrated."

"Then why didn't you tell me about them? I didn't know they were there until Aunt Lyd showed them to me that day."

"Aunt Abby asked me not to."

"Why, how funny! What could be her reason?" Isabel ceased her activities in the drawer. She knelt in front of the bureau and looked up at Peggy with puzzled eyes.

"Oh, I can't explain! Don't ask me, Isabel. You know how queer Aunt Abby is sometimes. She just said they would tell you themselves."

"But she didn't seem to like it because Aunt Lyd showed them to me! I didn't think much about it then, but just now Dorothy said that you and your mother had gone to see the Chisholms about me and the secret stairs, and then I remembered Aunt Abby was so sort of annoyed with Aunt Lyd, and asked her if she had told me something and Aunt Lyd said she hadn't. And now here is Dorothy telling me this! Of course, I am curious to know why I and the secret stairs and the Chisholms are all mixed up!"

"It is rather a mixture," said Peggy, laughing as usual, "but you needn't worry. Dot is on the scent,

THE SECRET STAIRS

she thinks, of some great secret. You know what she is about finding out things. I just walked around there with mother. Mrs. Chisholm has been her most intimate friend ever since they were little bits of things, six years old. They always consult each other about everything. They just adore each other."

"But Dorothy seemed to know it was about me," persisted Isabel. "Of course, I am interested! Wouldn't you be if it were you?"

"Of course! But you know what Dot is, perfectly well. She probably heard a few words mother and I were saying when we didn't know she was anywhere near." Peggy paused. Then, having said that much, she decided that she had better go a little farther. "We have all of us always known the stairs were there, and I have been over them several times, and every one has. They are no secret. And I said to mother I didn't see why Aunt Abby wouldn't let me say anything to you about them, and mother said it had something to do—oh, with the past, and then she said she was going to talk over things with Mrs. Chisholm, and would I walk over there with her after lunch. She and Mrs. Chisholm are always talking over things, but Dot must have heard some of it, and got it all mixed up, and thought I was going there to talk, too. As if they would let me in on their consultations! Mother and Mrs. Chisholm

CINDERELLA, AND HER NEW ROOM

are just like two girls when they get together. So you needn't worry, Isabel. They are probably hard at it now, this very minute. Mother is telling her how hard it is to bring up a family of six children properly, and Mrs. Chisholm is asking mother if she likes the way she has trimmed her winter hat—dear old things!" added Peggy, with a touch of the patronage of youth. "Come on, Isabel, we must get busy, or you'll never get moved."

Isabel accepted this explanation, which seemed to her fairly good, and although she was still puzzled, she put the subject aside for the time being. Indeed, there was enough for her to think about without it. The mere moving was nothing. The great event of the afternoon was the arrangement of her new room. Downstairs the exquisite and immaculate wallpaper had made impossible the idea of tacking up pictures and posters, and the thousand and one treasures that girls love to fasten up on their walls. Boys, too, of course, as the walls of Phil's room across the hall bore witness. Aunt Abby had placed no restrictions upon her movements beyond being careful not to drop things. Isabel, therefore, felt free to wield the hammer as she would, and the sound of her tap-tap-tap could be heard even in the lower hall. Picture after picture which she had long cherished—postcards, calendars, war posters, a few photographs, a little water color some one had once given her,

THE SECRET STAIRS

all unframed, which she had carried around in her trunks on her travels with her aunt—all of these treasures were at last in proper position after much consultation with Peggy.

The photographs of her mother and father were, of course, as usual, on her dressing table. On another bureau, a high chiffonier that was between the front windows, she placed a large photograph of her Aunt Clara, so elaborately framed that the frame alone would catch the eye immediately of any one who might enter the room. The picture itself also invited attention. Mrs. Todd had had this photograph taken when she became engaged to the marquis. She was arrayed in evening costume of the most elaborate style, a handsome fur-trimmed wrap about her shoulders, and pushed back sufficiently to show her jewelry. It would have been difficult to find the photograph of a woman more unlike the Misses Rodney.

"This is Aunt Clara," Isabel explained to Peggy. "I haven't had it out before, because there wasn't any place for it downstairs. I am going to ask all three of my Rodney aunts, and Uncle Charles, and, of course, Phil, to give me their photographs, and have a collection on the top of this high bureau of all my relations. Then, I mean to have that table over there for all my friends. I'll have you in the center, Pegs, and Mary Chisholm and—oh, all the girls

CINDERELLA, AND HER NEW ROOM

who are really my friends, as fast as they are so. There aren't so very many yet, but perhaps they will come along. You know I didn't have any relations, I thought, and now I've got a lot. Perhaps it will be the same way with friends."

"Of course it will!" cried Peggy. The tears came into her eyes when Isabel said this. Peggy was quick in all her emotions. There was something infinitely pathetic to her in the thought of a girl of fourteen who was just beginning to collect relatives and friends, although she could not have described her feeling about it. She threw her arms around Isabel. "You'll have lots of friends, Isabel. No doubt about that! But don't you forget that I was the first one!"

"I'll never forget that, Pegsy," said Isabel, kissing her. "There'll never be anybody in your place of honor but yourself. Your picture is going to be in the very center of the table. Do hurry up and give me one!"

All went merrily after this in every sense of the word. The room, from being a quiet, rather chilling chamber, its silent and unadorned walls disclosing none of the many secrets of its past, became in the space of an hour quite transformed into what might be called a museum of all that was festive. Never had such a riot of color been seen before in the Rodney mansion. This effect of gayety was heightened

THE SECRET STAIRS

by the confusion on the floor, where many of Isabel's belongings were still strewn about. On the bed and the chairs had been tossed the bright garments which her Aunt Clara had loved to buy—kimonos, scarfs, silk stockings, hats, sweaters, blouses—it might have been a Fifth Avenue "specialty shop." Two trunks, full of these treasures, had been sent after Isabel, and one of them had been placed in the upper hall and had not been unpacked until now. The girls hurried in and out of the room, carrying armfuls of clothing and dropping it into any space that was available. Caution was forgotten in the pleasure of the task. Peggy's interest in it, and her wonder at the quantity of Isabel's belongings, and Isabel's satisfaction in displaying them to such an appreciative friend, caused their tongues to chatter fast and steadily. Their conversation never ceased for an instant, and there was almost as much laughter as talk. They forgot every vestige of caution. Shoes were dropped, chairs were set in new places, the bed was moved, the closet door was actually slammed; but neither girl was conscious of making a sound.

"I have had the time of my life," announced Peggy. "I never had such a good time! Why, Isabel, how funny it must seem to you to live here! I think it was very nice of you to agree to be twins and

CINDERELLA, AND HER NEW ROOM

to dress my way, when you have such loads of things that are so different and so—so gay!”

“Oh, they’re too gay,” said Isabel indifferently. “I really like your way best. Aunt Clara was always buying things when we were in any big city, like Chicago or San Francisco or New York. She has lots of money and she just loves to shop. She likes it better than anything else. She used to buy anything she saw that she liked and then, when she got it home and thought it wasn’t becoming to her, or anything else she didn’t like about it after all, she would give it to me. Of course, I didn’t wear all this stuff, and lots of the things I don’t much like. I had forgotten all about this extra trunk I had there, that she sent on. Aunt Clara just adores spending money.”

“I should say that she did!” said a voice at the door, awe-inspiring in its accents.

The two girls turned quickly. On the threshold stood Aunt Abby. Her portly form fairly bristled with indignation. Her large face, no longer placid, was red and astonished, her spectacles gleamed—indeed, her smooth hair, no doubt, would have stood on end had it not been held neatly in place by a hair net. She was annoyance personified. She actually gasped in her effort to express her feelings and yet maintain her calm.

“This is the saddest of sights!” she said solemnly at last.

THE SECRET STAIRS

This opinion of the festive scene was so unexpected that Peggy, unable otherwise to control her amusement, cast herself face downward upon the heavily-laden couch which, being on casters, sped over the floor with a rumble, knocked against a little table that held a collection of treasures not yet arranged in place, and tipped them off with a clatter. Isabel dropped another pair of shoes that she happened to have in her hands, and began to help Peggy pick up the things. Peggy was giggling more helplessly than ever, and, of course, Isabel had to laugh, too. No normal schoolgirl could have kept from laughter at that moment. Miss Abby, however, thought otherwise.

"I don't know which of three things pains and astonishes me the most," she said. "The noise you have been making, which could be heard all over the house; the scene of confusion and extravagance which I find in this room; or your exceedingly disrespectful laughter. Peggy, whatever Isabel's bringing-up may have been, I am sure that you should know better!"

"Oh, I do know better, Aunt Abby! I'm awfully sorry!" stammered Peggy, filled with horror lest she should laugh again. She felt it coming. "It was most frightfully rude, I know very well, but, *dear* Aunt Abby, if you had only seen yourself standing there looking so solemn, you know, and—and—say—

CINDERELLA, AND HER NEW ROOM

ing this r-room was the s-saddest of s-sights—oh—oh—I can't help it, Aunt Abby—and I'm sorry——” She broke again into the merriest and the Peggy-est of laughter.

Miss Abby hesitated. She stepped further into the room. She felt that she should scold harder, but “the woman who hesitates is lost!” Even she could not resist the contagion. In spite of herself, Miss Rodney also laughed!

Isabel looked at her aunt for a moment in blank astonishment. “Aunt Abby, are you—don't you—can you——” but no one ever knew what she was trying to say, for she, too, was laughing, and before any one of them recovered her power of speech, a new voice was heard in the doorway.

“What's all this? What's all this?” demanded Professor Rodney. “A joke on foot and the rest of us know nothing of it? Phœbe and I have no intention of submitting to any private jokes up on the third floor!” And there stood Uncle Charles, with Aunt Phœbe leaning on his arm—Aunt Phœbe who had not been over the third-story stairs for at least three years!

“Phœbe!” gasped Miss Rodney. “Phœbe! Charles, how could you?”

“How could I? How *couldn't* I! Phœbe insisted upon coming.”

“Of course I did,” said Miss Phœbe. “I was so

THE SECRET STAIRS

thankful Charles came up to see me. I have been longing to know what was going on. Give me a chair, Isabel—if you have one to spare—and I will sit down and enjoy myself. Dear, dear! What a sight!”

“Phœbe, you must use all your self-control!” implored Miss Abby. “I tremble for the effect of this upon your poor nerves!”

“My poor nerves are very much better than they’ve been for some time, sister,” returned Miss Phœbe. “It has done me good to have more young life in the house. Isabel, my dear child, you have really done me good! I have been intending to tell you so. Now suppose we don’t say anything more about anything so tiresome as nerves. Where did you get all these things?”

“Aunt Clara gave them to me.”

“Well, well!” exclaimed Uncle Charles. Then a little wicked gleam came into his kind eyes and Peggy, who adored him, knew that something funny was coming. “My dear, when you arrived, you came under false pretenses! You pretended to be poor, not to say penniless, and you actually thought we were collectors of curios! And here we find you a wealthy young woman with a wardrobe, I should judge, that is fit for a princess. You are Cinderella herself. And you, I should say, are the collector!

CINDERELLA, AND HER NEW ROOM

A collector of—of——” He paused, and laughed at her.

“Trash?” laughed Isabel. “But Cinderella—oh, I love that, Uncle Charles!”

“And I suppose those are all your glass slippers,” he said, pointing to a heap of shoes on the floor.

But Miss Abby felt that the time had come to resume both gravity and authority. “I must go down to my work in the lower part of the house,” she said. “Isabel, you will understand that though I—I appreciate the humor of the situation, for we Rodneys all have a sense of humor—I still think there was too much noise. You and Peggy will please get the room in order as quickly as possible. Charles, if you have any influence over Phœbe, you will get her downstairs before she suffers a complete collapse.”

“I will, Abby!” said the Professor, meekly.

They all preserved a decorous silence until Miss Abby’s heavy footsteps had reached the second floor. Then Aunt Phœbe spoke.

“The Rodney sense of humor is an excellent family possession, Charles. I am so glad dear Abby feels that she has it.”

The two laughed like a boy and girl, and presently Uncle Charles helped Isabel and Peggy put the room to rights, while Aunt Phœbe made suggestions from the couch which had been cleared for her to lie upon.

THE SECRET STAIRS

No one had mentioned the photograph of Isabel's other aunt, but each one of the Rodneys had felt a secret dismay at seeing it. Although there was so much else in the room, Aunt Clara's photograph dominated the entire scene.

The afternoon ended merrily, and it was nearly six o'clock when the Professor helped his sister downstairs, and Peggy ran home through the gardens, leaving a very happy Isabel in sole possession of her new room.

"They are all darlings!" she thought. "Even Aunt Abby is a—well, a half-darling!"

CHAPTER XIII

THANKSGIVING DAY, AND THE C. F. T.

PHILIP came home the next afternoon, it being the day before Thanksgiving. Isabel had looked forward to his arrival with the keenest anticipation. She hoped for his undivided attention that first evening at least. She was waiting in the hall before it was time for him to reach the house from the train. Her quick ears recognized his footsteps as he at last came down the street and turned in at the gate, and she opened the front door before he ran up the steps.

"Oh, Phil!" she greeted him joyously; "I'm so glad you've come! I thought you'd never get here. Was your train late? Let me take your bag. Oh, I'm so glad you've come home! I've got a surprise for you. I can hardly wait to show you something!"

She seized his suitcase, but he shook her off.

"For the love of Mike!" he exclaimed. "Do you think I'm too feeble to carry my own kit?" In his indignation he entirely forgot to give her any greeting. "One would think I had never come home be-

THE SECRET STAIRS

fore!" Then he glanced at her in the light of the hall lamp and her face gave his conscience a slight twinge. He stooped and kissed her cheek. "You've got to get used to me, old girl! You mustn't think I'm the kind that likes to be wrapped up in cotton wool!"

By this time the aunts and uncle had come to the door of the living room, and Phil greeted in turn each one of them and then ran up to his room. Isabel had intended to escort him up, and to take that opportunity to show him her own new room, but he went so fast that she would have had to run herself, and something held her back from doing so. Instead, she took up a book and sat down near her uncle by the table with the reading lamp. It occurred to her that although her aunts, she well knew, had been eagerly looking forward to Phil's holidays, they took his arrival very quietly. They had all welcomed him warmly, to be sure, and asked him how he was, and one or two other questions as to his welfare, and then they resumed their occupations precisely as though he had merely come home from Boston. She gave a heavy sigh. It was all so different from what she had expected.

Her uncle gave her a quick glance over the top of his book. He presently put it down and took a little pad of paper which lay near him on the table and which he was in the habit of using for notes on

THANKSGIVING DAY, AND THE C. F. T.

what he read. He scribbled a few words on it, and, tearing off the paper, he handed it quietly to Isabel. "Here is something for you to remember," he said in a low voice. "An old proverb!"

She took it and read the words, "Boys will be boys!" She looked at him gratefully. It was wonderful, she thought, how Uncle Charles always understood. Then she gave a little laugh, and, borrowing his pencil, wrote on the other side of the bit of paper, "Then why can't girls be girls?" and returned it to him.

Her uncle gave his little chuckle of appreciation. "Good for you, my dear!" he said. "I fully agree with you. There should certainly be equal rights."

"What is the joke?" asked Miss Abby mildly. "Are you playing a writing game?"

"A sort of one," returned her brother. "Isabel and I agree on equal suffrage."

Miss Abby shook her head, and put down her knitting. "I know your views, Charles, but I have always maintained, and I maintain still, that women can accomplish more without the vote than with it——"

"Supper is served, Miss Rodney," said the maid at the door, and greatly to the relief of the family, Sister Abby's mind was diverted. They all rose with alacrity and moved toward the dining room just as Phil came racing downstairs.

THE SECRET STAIRS

Uncle Charles's little hint had its effect. When Isabel learned that her brother had an engagement and was going out immediately after supper, she showed no outward sign of anything that she may have felt. She laughed and talked so much more naturally than had been the case when Phil went away, and was in every way so much more at ease, that his attention was arrested. He looked at her critically—and brotherly. He was so pleased with what he saw and heard that he spoke his mind.

"I say, Isabel, you're some girl, after all," he said. "You do look quite a corker. Never saw anybody so improved. It's wonderful how you've caught on, so soon—in the way you talk, too. You might have lived here always."

Isabel's face flushed. It was still easy to become embarrassed as well as somewhat provoked. Then she caught her uncle's friendly and amused eye. "Go, it, my dear! Say it if you want to! I'll back you!" he said.

She forgot her annoyance and laughed. "Thank you, oh, my brother!" she said, turning to Philip. "I value your kind words! I am so glad your royal highness is pleased with me."

This retort was so unexpected that Philip could only stare at her for a moment, while the family actually laughed *with* Isabel and *at him*! Even Aunt

THANKSGIVING DAY, AND THE C. F. T.

Abby appreciated the situation. Then he recovered himself. He grinned at Isabel in his own inimitable way—the way she loved. “Gee whiz!” was all he said. “You’re going some!”

They did not see him again that evening, and he came down so late for breakfast that Isabel was sure he would receive a reprimand from their Aunt Abby, but he escaped it entirely. On the contrary, she had given special directions that breakfast should be kept hot for him, and it was half past nine when he sauntered into the dining room and requested that it should be brought in. He invited Isabel to stay and talk to him—she had been about to leave the room—and after a moment’s hesitation she sat down again.

The Rodneys’ dining room was a cheerful place at that hour of the morning. The two windows which faced the south and east were filled with plants, and the sun shone upon the deep pink of the geraniums, and on the trailing green vines which hung from pots that were placed high above. Isabel’s last Thanksgiving Day had been passed in a hotel in Chicago, and in surroundings so different from this pleasant, quiet home that it was hard to realize that she was the same girl. And with a brother, too! How little she suspected last Thanksgiving that she possessed a brother! She quite unconsciously sat and gazed at him adoringly.

THE SECRET STAIRS

"How's old Bayport?" asked the adored one. "Anything doing?"

"I thought you would hear everything last night," said Isabel, demurely.

"Well, I did hear a few things, but I thought you might know a few more. Why didn't you tell me you had moved up into my neighborhood?"

"I was just going to. How did you find out? Did you hear that last night?"

"No, they forgot to tell me that, but I took a look around this morning before I came down. Saw the door open, which has always been kept hermetically sealed, except when the room was getting cleaned, and thought I'd look in."

"Oh!" cried Isabel, much disappointed. "I wanted to surprise you!"

"Too late, my dear child. But I got the surprise, all right. It might be called the surprise of my life. Never saw such a lot of stuff in all my days."

"Stuff!"

"Oh, well, articles. *Objets de vertu*. Ahem! Hope you admire my French. We'll go up after I get through breakfast and take a look. I'd rather like to see those posters closer."

This was unexpected. Isabel could scarcely conceal her satisfaction, but she made a great effort to do so, and the best way seemed to be to change the subject.

THANKSGIVING DAY, AND THE C. F. T.

"There's something I'm crazy to ask you about, Phil," she said.

"Ask away!" He helped himself to another roll. "As to the original meaning of the secret stairs, I suppose."

"Why, how in the world did you know?"

"Don't faint, my dear child! Who wouldn't want to know about secret stairs if they came to live in a house where there are some? And as I happen to have heard Aunt Abby telling Peggy not to say anything to you about them, and as I knew that sooner or later you would hear about them and would promptly ask Peggy, and she would say she couldn't tell you, and as I knew you were a girl and so would, of course, be frightfully curious forthwith, I naturally but most cleverly suppose that the time has come for you to ask me. I—also most cleverly—hopped out of the way that day when Aunt Abby was occupied with Pegs, so she wouldn't attempt the same game on me, and then she was so busy getting me off to school I guess she forgot to order me, too, to keep mum. Who did tell you?"

"Aunt Lyd!"

"And no reason on earth why she shouldn't—why you shouldn't know all there is to know. Let's go up to our floor as soon as I get through breakfast, and take a squint at your room, and then go down the stairs before Aunt Abby gets on to us."

THE SECRET STAIRS

It was wonderful to have him refer to "our floor," and to make this proposition! Again she adored him, but she kept her eyes discreetly cast down. Although he was a somewhat different brother from the one she had imagined when she had longed for one, still he was willing to look at her treasures, and to enter with her into what seemed amazingly like a scheme to circumvent their aunt! He was a pretty good brother, after all!

Presently he pushed back his chair. "There, I think I'm through. Don't believe I'm equal to another bite. I tell you, it seems good to get home. No johnny-cake like this where I come from! It is about three inches thick at school instead of all nice and crusty. I wish I could manage another piece! Come on, Isabel!"

He seized her by the hand and they scampered up to the third floor like two children, and no one saw them but Aunt Lyd. Philip paused long enough to invite her to join them, but she had on her hat and was going out.

"I only wish I could," she said, "but I am going around to the church to arrange something. You know people send fruit and vegetables and things there on Thanksgiving Day for the hospital, and I have to look after them a bit. Be sure to come to church, children!"

"Oh, we will!" Phil called back to her, as he and

THANKSGIVING DAY, AND THE C. F. T.

Isabel raced up the second flight of stairs. "Aunt Lyd is a brick; I'll tell you that in case you haven't found it out," he added to his sister.

"Oh, I have! So is Aunt Phœbe. So is Uncle Charles."

"I notice with pain a sad omission," said Phil, stopping in the hall and fixing a stern gaze upon her. "You don't appear to be going to mention the brick-like character of the presiding genius of this mansion—our revered relative, Miss Rodney."

"I thought I would leave her for you to speak of," retorted Isabel. "I didn't want to grab them all, but—but I revere her very highly!"

Phil roared with glee. "Come on, young 'un!" he exclaimed, again seizing her arm. "I shall have no further anxiety about you, my small sister! You'll do!"

They spent so much time in a close examination of Isabel's treasures that it was necessary to get ready for church before Philip was able to tear himself from them to take Isabel down the secret stairs, so that exciting adventure they were obliged to postpone, but Phil promised to show them to her before he left home. They still had three days in which to see them, for he was not to go back to school until Sunday night.

"Perhaps there will be a chance this afternoon," said he. "We have dinner at such a beastly hour.

THE SECRET STAIRS

Aunt Abby can't be induced to have it at night—she says, on account of letting the maids all go off in the afternoon, but it is really, I believe, because she insists on sticking to the habits of her ancestors. Hang all ancestors, say I!"

"They're hung already, on the walls!"

"Ho! ho! So they are! That's pretty good," laughed Phil. "But what's the use of all their old customs and ways bobbing up again long after they're peacefully in their graves? I tell you what, Isabel! When you and I keep house here together some day, a nice old bachelor and old maid brother and sister, we'll let our nieces and nephews do exactly as they like and have their meals at the hours which suit them."

"Yes," agreed Isabel, "we will. But there's one thing you've forgotten! Quite a flaw in your plans."

"What's that?"

"If you are an old bachelor and I'm an old maid, where are we going to find our nieces and nephews?"

Philip grinned broadly. "Right you are, my child! Never thought of that. Well, all the better. We can do what *we* like after all!"

Their plans for future ease were rudely interrupted by Miss Rodney's voice from the foot of the stairs. "Are you ready for church?" she demanded. "And you had better dress now for dinner, Isabel."

THANKSGIVING DAY, AND THE C. F. T.

They will begin to come soon after we get home from church."

"I told you so!" whispered Phil. "But we may get a chance at the stairs this afternoon. I hoped there was going to be skating or coasting or something doing, but it's been so beastly mild down here. Up our way we've got plenty of snow. Jimmy would like to be in on the stairs, and we'll get him off from the others somehow."

Jim Curtis and his father and mother always dined with the Rodneys on Thanksgiving Day, for they were distant cousins, and it had been a lifelong habit, and some other relatives who lived in Boston came also every year. It had been the custom for them all to do so as far back as any of them could remember. The Boston relatives were all rather elderly, the children having grown up and married, and were now dining elsewhere, so the party in the Rodney house was composed almost entirely of the contemporaries of the aunts and uncle, and Philip, Isabel and Jim Curtis were the only young people.

Although Isabel had seen little of Jim of late, as he also was at school, she felt that she knew him very well. In fact, she regarded him as her first friend in Bayport, and she was more at ease with him than with Phil's other friends. She sat at table between him and her brother and they all chatted,

THE SECRET STAIRS

briskly while the soup, the turkey, the salad and the squash pies, and all the delicacies, substantial or otherwise, that were considered necessary by Miss Rodney for the proper observance of a New England Thanksgiving, passed before them and into them, in what seemed to be an endless succession of food. It was three o'clock when they at last rose from the table, and most of the party felt ready for a nap. Mr. Rodney invited the gentlemen to smoke with him in the library, and Miss Rodney and the ladies devoted themselves to knitting and a bit of gossip in the parlor, Miss Phœbe, who had come down to dinner, having first been safely escorted to her room. Philip suggested that Jimmy should be taken up to see Isabel's posters, and they were just on their way when Peggy was seen coming across from her house. The three were on the landing, halfway up the first flight of stairs, when Phil discovered her. There was a large window on this landing, from which could be seen the gardens and the Duanes' house.

"If there isn't old Pegs!" he exclaimed, rather ruefully.

"You sound disappointed," said Jim. "I never knew any one before who wasn't glad to see old Pegs. I know I am."

"Oh, I don't mind seeing her, but she is going to upset things, unless I can stop her up somehow."

THANKSGIVING DAY, AND THE C. F. T.

"What on earth do you mean, old man?" Jim looked at him inquiringly.

"You'll see. Peggy," he said over the banisters in a sepulchral whisper, so piercing that it might have been heard much farther away than Peggy was, "come right up. Do not make yourself known to your *elders*. You will find your *bettors* gathered here, awaiting you, oh, my Pegs, but not wholly pleased to see you!"

"Oh, dear, how can I bear it?" began Peggy, blithely. "What's up?"

"Sh! Sh! Not so loud! *We're* up—up the stairs! Come on! Hesitate not, but swear silence. No matter what you see, nor what we do, ask no questions. Vouchsafe no information yourself! No matter where I lead you, smile and keep on smiling, but be silent!"

"Mercy!" exclaimed Peggy, but in a whisper. "It sounds like that advertisement of automobile tires! 'Keep smiling!' I can keep smiling, but I can't possibly keep still! I never kept still in my life!"

"I know that. Alas, most of us—all of us—know it! But this time you've got to promise, or back you go through the gardens. Jimmy and I will see to that. The whole success of this afternoon's adventure hangs on your keeping still. Swear!"

"I do! I do! If you have planned to murder me and throw me—throw me——"

THE SECRET STAIRS

"Down the secret stairs!" put in Isabel.

"Exactly! I will still be silent." As she said this, Peggy and Philip exchanged a glance. He winked slightly, she nodded almost imperceptibly. The bargain was signed, sealed and delivered with no need of further explanation. That was one good thing about Peggy in the opinion of the various relatives and friends of her own age. They never had to waste time in explaining things to her.

This matter settled to every one's satisfaction, the four proceeded upstairs. When the third-story landing was reached, Philip turned and confronted the others.

"Ladies and gentle—*man*," he announced with a wave of his hand, "the show is about to open. I assure you, you will find it in every way worth the money you may have forked out for tickets. I haven't had the pleasure of seeing any of that money myself as yet, but hope to some time. We will now proceed to the museum. You will find there articles gathered from every quarter of the globe, unless it is Abyssinia. I don't seem to recall anything that came from Abyssinia, but very likely I have overlooked it and there is something from there also. This collection is in the possession of a noted female traveler who has come to make her home in Bayport. She has a brother who intends some day to crib a few of those curios *if* he gets the chance. In

THANKSGIVING DAY, AND THE C. F. T.

the meantime, he is proud to live on the same floor with them—and with her. Ladies and gentle-man, the doors are now open and you are at liberty to enter. Later in the afternoon there will be a moving picture show entitled, 'The Mystery of the Stairs!' in which we will all take prominent parts. Enter! The C. F. T. (Celebrated Female Traveler, in case you don't catch on immediately) will now proceed. She will explain where each curio came from, its meaning and origin, and give little anecdotes about them all. C. F. T., please begin to proceed!"

Laughing and chattering, they all crowded into Isabel's room, and there was so much to see that it was nearly four o'clock before any one remembered that the program for the afternoon contained one more attraction.

"Ladies and gentle-man," said Philip, again resuming the rôle of master of ceremonies, "follow me! The scenario entitled, 'The Mystery of the Stairs,' will now be thrown upon the screen!"

CHAPTER XIV

RATS!

PHILIP led the way to the store-room. He opened the door, and then suddenly paused. "November days are short!" he announced, oracularly. "The darkness falls athwart the ancient panes! Await me here upon the threshold. I go to procure a torch to light us on our downward path!"

He went to his own room and presently returned with an electric flashlight. He flashed it into the face of each in turn. "Swear eternal secrecy!" he commanded in a deep voice. "Swear!" And each one promised silence. Then he crossed the room and felt the wall in a certain spot. For a few moments nothing happened. Philip's hand passed up and down, and to right and left. "Hang it!" he exclaimed in his natural voice and manner, "where is the spring? I bet Aunt Abby has had it sealed up!"

But she had not. A minute or two more of fumbling, and then he found it. The panel loosened,

RATS!

and a slight push widened the opening. Very soon it was wide enough for them to pass through.

Phil led the way with his light, and Isabel came next. Jim was the last to go through the little door, and, acting according to Philip's instructions, he closed it securely behind them.

"We don't want Aunt Abby to know what we're doing," he explained, "*if* we can help it! Of course, the others wouldn't mind. You can depend upon Aunt Abby to light on any mischief, though, on the part of yours truly! If anybody goes upstairs to look for us it would be Aunt Abby, but perhaps she'll think we're out. So we will be, for we'll go out through the old kitchen and pop in again through the new kitchen. Now, we mustn't say a word, or they will hear us in the parlor. You know these stairs follow the big chimney, and I'm pretty sure they could easily hear us from the time we reach the second floor, so we must be mighty careful."

The old staircase was very steep and winding. The stairs were shallow, and to keep from falling it was necessary to put the foot sideways upon each one and to cling to the railing which served as banister. It was difficult for four persons to make the descent without some noise, but not a word was spoken, and though it was easier to suppress speech than laughter, they were on the whole surprisingly quiet. But the steps of four pairs of feet, however

THE SECRET STAIRS

stealthily placed, were certain to produce a slight sound, and Phil was obliged frequently to pause, and with a flash of his light in their faces, give a piercing "Sh-h-h!" This added an additional thrill to the already thrilling adventure, and Isabel could scarcely restrain a little shriek of excitement every time he did it.

In the meantime the company in the parlor, having talked steadily for more than an hour, allowed small silences to occur in their conversation. They were all related to one another and all intimate, and when a pause came no one felt it necessary to fill it with a remark. A Thanksgiving dinner seldom makes for sprightliness, and Miss Abby's head was actually nodding when a strange sound was heard from somewhere in the house.

"What was that?" she asked, wide-awake immediately.

"Rats, probably," said one of the ladies from Boston. "They are very bad in town."

"That is because you will live in a hotel," said Miss Rodney, now launched upon one of her favorite themes. "Of course, you are bound to have both rats and mice."

"But you seem to have them even here, and in your own house," protested her cousin. "We have just this minute heard one!"

"I am not at all sure it was a rat. It was probably

RATS!

something falling down in the kitchen. A large kettle fell the other day in the pantry and made a noise not unlike it." She resumed her knitting, and also her topic. "Rats, and mice, too, are always bad in hotels."

Another diversion was created by the entrance of Professor Rodney, Mr. Curtis—Jim's father—and another elderly cousin. Rats were forgotten for the time, and the circle around the fire was widened sufficiently for them to draw up chairs and sit down.

"Where are the young people?" asked the Professor.

"They all went upstairs," said his sister Lydia. "I heard Phil say he was going to show them Isabel's treasures. She certainly has a collection."

"Where did she get them all?" asked the Boston cousin alertly. She really wanted to know more about Isabel's early history, and had been unable thus far to extract any satisfactory information from the Misses Rodney.

"She has gone about more or less with her aunt," replied Miss Abby.

"But what a change it must be for her to settle down with you here in old Bayport!"

"I don't know why you say that! It may be a change, but it is certainly one for the better."

"Oh, I didn't say it wasn't, my dear Abby. And she seems like a very nice girl."

THE SECRET STAIRS

"She certainly is," said the Professor and his sister Lydia with one voice.

"And why should she not be?" inquired Miss Abby, perceptibly ruffled. "She is young yet, and she is a Rodney. She——"

But her remark remained unfinished. There was a scuffling sound somewhere in the walls which was heard by every one sitting in the parlor.

"There are those rats!" exclaimed the Professor, triumphantly. "I told you, Abby, that we ought to have a cat." He had long wanted a nice, quiet cat, but Miss Abby did not care for them.

"I told you it was a rat!" said the Boston cousin, with similar triumph. "But I never before knew a rat to make such a loud noise as what we heard a little while ago. Much louder than any Boston rat I ever heard."

"Of course a Bayport rat would excel the rat of Boston!" said the Professor, wickedly.

But to Miss Rodney it was a serious matter, and must be looked into at once. "It may possibly be the young people upstairs. Lydia, suppose you run up and see what they are doing, and I will go to the kitchen. Peep in at Phœbe on your way. She may be very much upset. It was a very loud noise the first time."

She hurried to the kitchen regions, where all was quiet. The maids had evidently gone out, and no

RATS!

pots or pans were found to have fallen down. She returned just as her sister came downstairs.

"Phœbe is asleep, I think," said Lydia, "so I didn't go into the room. And there is no one on the third floor, so Isabel and the boys must have gone out. It is all perfectly quiet up there." No one knew that Peggy had come to the house. "It is really nothing, Abby, to be alarmed about."

They returned to the group around the fire and sat down again. After a little further conversation on the subject, they began to talk about something else. The Boston relatives had just remembered that as they were to take a train to Boston it must be nearly time to say good-by, and after time-tables and watches had been consulted, they made ready to go. In the confusion caused by their departure, the noises in the walls were forgotten, and some very peculiar sounds which would have been perfectly audible had the family still been in the living room were not heard by them when they were all at the front door, bidding farewell to their guests. Mr. and Mrs. Curtis went home at the same time, and presently the Rodneys were left alone. They returned to their chairs around the fire-place, to enjoy the pleasant blaze of the big log the Professor threw on, and to talk over the events of the day.

"It all went off beautifully," remarked Miss Rodney. "The turkey was a fine one, and was done to a

THE SECRET STAIRS

turn, and I defy any one to make a better pie than our Martha. I don't wonder Emily remarked upon it. No hotel could produce such pies as Martha's." Emily was the name of the Boston cousin who boarded.

But before any reply could be made to this, they were all startled by the sound of knocking. It seemed to come from a distance, but it was distinctly heard by each of them.

"There!" exclaimed Miss Rodney, looking hard at her brother with an I-told-you-so expression in her eyes. "Do rats knock like that?" She did not wait for an answer, but hurried from the room. "Some one at the back door, I suppose, and the maids are both out."

But no one was there. Her brother and sister had followed her. They looked out into the garden, Mr. Rodney going as far as the gate which opened upon the alley, but no one was in sight. Miss Rodney, distressed that he should venture so far without his hat, forgot for the time the cause of the investigation, and she was lecturing him severely, and prophesying a bad cold by way of punishment, when again they heard the knocking. This time it sounded far up in the house, and with one accord they hastened upstairs. When they reached the third floor the sound occurred again, and very near them.

RATS!

"Some one is in this house!" said Miss Rodney. "It is not rats at all; it is burglars!"

"Abby!" exclaimed Lydia, openly laughing at her. "Do burglars knock to say they are coming? I know who it is! It's those children. They have probably been exploring the secret stairs and are fastened in! You know how easily it might happen."

She opened the door of the storeroom near which they were standing. A loud pounding at once came from the wall, and then her nephew's voice was heard.

"Is somebody there?" he cried. "Let us out, please! We're caught on the secret stairs and can't get out!"

Miss Lydia laughed again as she crossed the room and touched the spring. The panel moved, the door slid back, and in a minute Phil, Isabel, Peggy and Jim emerged from their prison, flushed, breathless, and also laughing.

"Oh, such a time as we've had!" they exclaimed, all talking at once. "When we got down there we couldn't get the door into the oven open, and so we came back up here and this door had been fastened too tight, and we couldn't find the inside spring anywhere, so then we went down again and by that time Phil's battery was all used up and his flashlight wouldn't give any light, and it was pitch dark. Oh, it was perfectly thrilling!"

THE SECRET STAIRS

The storeroom was brightly illuminated, for the house was lighted by electricity and Mr. Rodney had touched the button when he came upstairs. Uncle and aunts stood in a row, while the four culprits lined up against the wall. The uncle and one aunt were laughing as heartily as did the culprits. The other aunt was very sober. The situation did not seem to her in the smallest degree amusing. On the contrary, she was plainly displeased.

"I am perfectly astonished," she said, as soon as she felt that she could be heard. "Who is responsible for this escapade? You, I suppose," turning upon Peggy, "and yet you gave me your promise!"

Peggy giggled, but did not speak.

"It wasn't Pegs at all, Aunt Abby," said Philip. "It was my show entirely. Why shouldn't we take Isabel down the secret stairs? You've had her taken all over Bayport to see the sights, and here we've got the queerest of all right in our own house, and yet you didn't want her to see it! You never told me not to show them to her, though, so of course I had her see them. It was just my luck to have this old flashlight go back on me, and not a match among us. You never would have known we were doing it if we hadn't been shut in there in the dark. Jimminy, it was black and queer down there by the old oven!"

"James," said Miss Rodney, paying no further attention to her nephew, but turning her guns upon

RATS!

his friend, "your father and mother have gone home. They had to go without you!"

Jimmy smiled sweetly at her. In spite of being called by his full name, which did not often happen, he felt no fear. He knew Miss Rodney's "bark was worse than her bite." "Too bad!" he said. "Awfully hard on Dad and Ma to have to trot home without their precious infant! Hadn't you better telephone 'em, Cousin Abby, and say the body of their missing child has been found sealed up in the walls of the historic Rodney mansion?"

"I am surprised at you," said his cousin severely.

"Oh, come, Abby!" said the Professor, feeling that severity had had its turn and it was now time to bring in something else. "We have all had our fun with the secret stairs. I remember how Phil and I used to play Indians on them. I mean Phil's and your father, Isabel. We had great times together when we were boys, though he was six years younger than I was."

"Oh, I'm so glad you told me, Uncle Charles!" exclaimed Isabel. "I like to think of him doing things like that, right here in this house. And did Mamma ever go over the secret stairs? Did you show them to her?"

There was profound stillness in the storeroom. Peggy and Phil exchanged a glance of dismay, as did Aunt Lydia and Uncle Charles. Jimmy looked

THE SECRET STAIRS

closely at Miss Rodney. He suspected something, but he was merely an amused spectator. It was all of small consequence to him. Miss Abby gazed at her niece.

"Your mother did go over the stairs," she said. "Yes, she went down those stairs! Come, it is time to be getting supper. The maids are both out to-night, you know."

She led the way, and they all followed. A curious solemnity had descended upon each one of them. Even the usually smiling Jimmy looked sober; and Isabel felt a strange inclination to cry. What could be the secret of her mother and those stairs? She was convinced now that there was a secret; until this moment she had only surmised it. One thing was certain: she must find out what that secret was.

Philip went back to boarding school, and on Monday morning the Dinsmore School was again open after the all-too-short holidays, but as the girls eagerly assured one another, Christmas would soon be here and then—good-by school for nearly two weeks! Of course it was not because they did not enjoy school, for they had very good times at "Old Dinsy," as they affectionately called the time-honored Bayport institution, but it goes without saying that vacation is "more fun" than school. Isabel's desk was next to that of Mary Chisholm. Peggy's was beyond Mary. The two girls had sat next to

RATS!

each other ever since they began as small children in the Primary Department. They had risen together through the succeeding grades until now they were in the Junior Class.

Anne Pendleton, two years older than these girls, had taken the Bryn Mawr examinations and expected to enter college the following autumn. Isabel liked Anne much better now than when she first came to Bayport, but she still felt slightly ill at ease with her, and she was not sorry to know that next year she would not be there. She was glad that she sat next to Mary Chisholm, rather than Anne. Mary had been friendly and kind from their first meeting, and Isabel longed to have her for a special friend. Peggy, of course, was that in a way, and then, too, she was considered a cousin, but Peggy had so many other intimate friends! She was always the center of some group. She was constantly called upon to take part in any fun that happened to be afoot. Mary, although liked by every one, was different, and she was in no way stiff and awe-inspiring, like Anne. Isabel was growing to care more and more for Mary, and her only fear was that Mary would not want her for a friend—that she did not need her. For Isabel had begun to wish that some one would really need her, just as she herself needed some one. Perhaps it would happen some day. It might even be Mary!

THE SECRET STAIRS

In the meantime she turned to Mary rather than to the popular Pegs whenever she needed help or advice as to her studies or whatever came up in her school life. She often went to Mary's home, and she was always welcomed by Mrs. Chisholm with a peculiarly tender cordiality. It was not long before she learned that Mrs. Chisholm and her mother had been close friends in their youth, for Isabel's mother had been a governess in the house of Mrs. Chisholm's brother, Mr. Goodwin. The Goodwins were the eastern people who when traveling in the West had met Isabel Owen, and, taking a fancy to the young and beautiful girl, had persuaded her to come home with them to Bayport to teach their children. Mrs. Chisholm and Isabel Rodney had long talks together about all that part of her mother's story, but the reason for her Aunt Abby's evident dislike of her sister-in-law, and the secret of the stairs, had not as yet been touched upon.

Christmas, with all its fun and merrymaking, came and went. Isabel had never in her life known such Christmas holidays as those, her first in Bayport. All the boys came home from school and college, and every day there were skating parties, and every evening a gathering of some kind at one of the houses. When a heavy snow-storm a day or two after Christmas spoiled the skating, coasting took its place. Isabel enjoyed it all thoroughly and became

RATS!

more at home among her new friends than she, or they, would have thought possible when she first arrived.

And so the old year passed away, and the new year dawned full of promise.

CHAPTER XV

"WHERE IS ISABEL?"

IT was a fine day in February when Miss Rodney decided that the time had come for her to make a certain expedition to call upon some of her relatives who lived in the country about ten miles from Bayport. She went to see these cousins twice every year with unfailing regularity, and the usual date for the winter visit was approaching. She would take advantage, therefore of the good weather and go that very day.

She came to this decision at about ten o'clock in the morning, when it was too late to suggest to Isabel that her aunt would like her to go with her. It would not do to wait for her return from school, for it was necessary to start early in the afternoon to make the necessary connections by train and trolley, as she expected to do. It was a great relief, therefore, at about one o'clock, for Miss Rodney to hear by telephone that one of her Bayport friends intended to go to the same place that afternoon, and

“WHERE IS ISABEL?”

in her own car. Knowing that Miss Rodney had cousins who lived there, the lady would be delighted to take her if she cared to go, and there would be room in the car for one or two others.

Of course, Miss Rodney was pleased to accept this invitation for Isabel and herself. They were to start at half past two, and as Isabel always came home soon after two she would surely be in time. It was very important, Miss Rodney thought, for her niece to meet some of her father's more distant relatives, and nothing should be allowed to stand in the way of her going. It was plainly a duty.

But to-day, of all others, Isabel did not come home at the usual time. At first it was supposed that lessons had detained her. Then, as time went on and Miss Rodney became more and more disturbed, Miss Lydia suggested that she should telephone to the Chisholms and the Duanes, for in all probability Isabel had gone home with one of her two friends. But the Chisholms did not respond to the telephone at all, which meant that they were not at home, and at the Duanes' there was no news of Isabel's whereabouts. Mrs. Duane and Peggy were out, and one of the maids answered the telephone. By this time Miss Rodney's friend had arrived at the door in her car, and rather than keep her waiting an instant, she hurried out to her.

“It is certainly very trying,” she said to her sis-

THE SECRET STAIRS

ter Lydia, who helped her on with her coat. "Of all days for Isabel not to come home at the usual time! She really ought to meet the Courtney cousins, and I am anxious for them to see her. I have not forgotten their disapproval when they heard she was coming to live with us. I should like to have them see for themselves how attractive Isabel is. She is almost too independent, though. I think she ought at least to telephone us when she doesn't come home after school. In my day mother would have been perfectly shocked if I had not asked permission before going somewhere to dinner, even to dine with one of the family."

"The girls nowadays are all independent, Abby!" said Lydia, always ready to defend her niece, and secretly delighted with the words of approval that had gone before. "You can't expect Isabel to be any different in that respect from the rest of the Bayport girls."

"It is too bad she isn't here, though," said Miss Rodney, as she went out of the door, "and too bad that Charles is away for the day, for if he had been at home he could have looked after Phœbe and you could have gone with us. It is such a wasted opportunity. If Isabel doesn't get home by five o'clock, Lydia, you had better telephone, or go somewhere to find out where she is. But, of course, she will be here before then."

"WHERE IS ISABEL?"

But when the old clock on the stairs struck five she was still absent, and both of the aunts at home were exceedingly anxious, although each one tried to hide her fears from the other.

"Of course, it isn't really so very late," said Lydia. "If she is coasting somewhere she would naturally forget to come home until the others do, and I suppose she is still so unused to family life that it doesn't occur to her that we may be worried. The truth is, Phœbe, we are like three hens with one little chicken!"

"If you had said 'one little duckling' you would be nearer the truth, Lyd!" said Miss Phœbe. "I am sure with her temperament and her independent nature our little duckling will take to the water sooner or later, and we shall all stand on the edge and flap our wings and cry 'chick! chick!' in vain. You and I will resign ourselves, but fancy dear Abby's frantic flapping and clucking!" Miss Phœbe laughed as she said this. "I have grown so fond of her, and it is no wonder. She is a dear child, and it has done me a world of good to have her with us. Why, I look forward to her little visits in my room two or three times a day with perfect delight. She is so companionable, and very quick-witted. And I think it quite remarkable that she has adapted herself to our ways so soon."

Miss Phœbe enjoyed an occasional afternoon alone

THE SECRET STAIRS

with Lydia or Charles when they were free to talk things over. She was seated in a big chair in the living room, with an expression of placid contentment on her face in spite of her anxiety about her niece. She did not really think anything was wrong, and for that reason Lydia hesitated to use the telephone in the hall, which was so near that her inquiries would have been heard. She decided that she would go herself to one or two houses near where their niece might be or where they would know about her. It was possible that she was coasting with some of the young people, for there had been great rejoicing over the recent snowstorm. But it would not do to go until her brother or sister should return, for Phœbe must not be left alone. That was a family rule that was seldom broken; so the two sisters sat by the fire and made conversation for some fifteen minutes longer, both growing more and more uneasy, but saying nothing on the matter nearest their hearts.

Miss Abby was the first to come in. It was nearly six o'clock when, large and imposing in her long fur coat, she entered the house. She had had a most successful expedition, and her voice showed her satisfaction.

"We had a wonderful afternoon! I am only sorry you were not all with me. I am especially sorry about Isabel, for the Courtneys want to meet

“WHERE IS ISABEL?”

her. “Where were you, Isabel?” she said, as she entered the room. “Why were you so late? Oh, she’s not here! What reason did she give for not coming home at the usual time?”

There was an instant’s silence. Then Miss Phœbe gave the dire news. “Isabel has not come yet, Abby. We are beginning to be a little anxious, but, of course, she is probably coasting and doesn’t realize how late it is.”

“*Beginning to be anxious!*” repeated her sister. “I should think you would have been so for hours, and no doubt you have been! Why, where can she be? It is extraordinary. I am seriously annoyed with Isabel. Why, Phœbe, it is quite enough to give you a serious set-back, and lately you have seemed stronger. Dear, dear! I think you had better go up to bed, Phœbe. It is the best place for you. Lydia will help you, while I go in to the Duanes’ to see what they know. I have my things on and it is better than telephoning. If Isabel is in there I want to find her there and speak my mind. It is very thoughtless of her, I must say. A hot water bottle and some spirits of ammonia, Lydia, and——”

“But I have not the slightest intention of being put to bed, Abby,” interrupted Miss Phœbe. “I shall stay right where I am until Isabel comes home, and I need neither ammonia nor hot water bags.”

Miss Abby’s surprise at this made her speechless.

THE SECRET STAIRS

She opened her mouth, but at that minute the clock began to strike six, and whatever she may have been about to say was forever left unsaid. She turned and left the room and the house, going out of the back door and across the two gardens to the Duanes'. She was now seriously alarmed, and her anxiety had the effect of increasing her displeasure. She walked into the library, where Mrs. Duane and Peggy were sitting, the picture of righteous indignation, and stood there by the threshold.

"Well, she isn't here after all!" she announced, without further greeting. "Peggy, you probably know something about her."

"Why, Abby!" exclaimed Mrs. Duane, as they both rose from their chairs. "How nice to see you! What ought Peggy to know?"

"Where Isabel is, of course!" Miss Rodney disdained to take the proffered chair. "Peggy, what have you been doing this afternoon, and where is Isabel?"

"I haven't the least idea, Aunt Abby," replied Peggy. "Mother and I have been in Boston. We got out of school so early that mother thought we ought to take the opportunity to go to town to the dentist's. I didn't want to a bit. I don't know what Isabel was going to do. I haven't seen her since we got home. It was great, having an extra holiday."

“WHERE IS ISABEL?”

“What do you mean by that? What extra holiday?”

“We got out of school at twelve. There was something the matter with the radiators, or something, and the house was too cold, Miss Dinsmore thought.”

“But Isabel didn’t come home then! I was in the house at that time myself. I should certainly have seen her, or at least we should have heard her.”

“But indeed she did, Aunt Abby!” said Peggy earnestly. “We came as far as your corner together, and Isabel was just going in your front gate when I left her. She waited a minute because the postman was coming along, and I ran on home. That is the last I saw of her.”

“I don’t think you need to be so very much alarmed, Abby,” said Mrs. Duane. “I have no doubt it can easily be explained.”

“Then please explain it, Margaret!”

But without waiting for a reply, Miss Rodney turned and left the house as suddenly as she had come. She walked back through the gardens, her feet, in the big galoshes that she wore, crunching heavily on the snow-covered paths. Where could the child be? Something had surely happened. If only Charles or even Philip were at home! There were occasions when one needed a man. She decided to call up the Chisholms.

THE SECRET STAIRS

But again there was no answer from their apartment. Miss Phœbe suggested that they might very probably have gone somewhere and invited Isabel to go with them, and Lydia was inclined to agree with her, but Miss Rodney scouted the idea as preposterous.

"Your nerves are giving way, Phœbe," she declared, "and you had really better take warning and do as I beg you to do about going to your room and being careful. If she were going on any expedition with the Chisholms she would have certainly telephoned, and the mere fact of your thinking of anything so extraordinary proves to me that you are upset."

The discussion was cut short, however, by the sound of stamping of snow from several pairs of feet on the back porch. The sisters all listened expectantly. Perhaps it was Isabel, come at last, and bringing some one with her. There were evidently several persons there, to judge by the noise. The three sisters sat in breathless silence. It was broken by the entrance of Peggy, Dorothy and Betty Duane, who advanced into the room.

"Oh, it is only you!" said Miss Abby, much disappointed. "Have you heard anything since I was there? Has she telephoned you? Now, why did she do that?"

"She hasn't, Aunt Abby," said Peggy, "but it

“WHERE IS ISABEL?”

seems that Dorothy and Betty saw her after I did and mother thought we had better come and tell you. They saw her——”

“Peggy Duane, I’m going to tell!” interposed Dorothy. “It’s my story.”

“All right! Then go ahead!”

“The idea of your telling it when——”

“I should like to hear what you have to say at once, Dorothy!”

“Yes, Aunt Abby, of course!” exclaimed Dorothy, immediately “taking the stage,” and with evident satisfaction. There was nothing she enjoyed more than being the center of interest, and it seldom happened. “You see it was this way. Peggy came home early, and mother said they must go to Boston about Peggy’s teeth, and so we were going to have early lunch so’s they could go in the quarter of two train, and Betty and I were up in the nursery, and Freddy and Miles were there, too, at least they were washing their hands and their hands were so dirty we had to wait and——”

“Dorothy, will you kindly let us know when and where you saw Isabel? I don’t care anything about the boys’ hands.”

“But I’m going to, Aunt Abby! I meant we had to wait a long time while they got the dirt off so we were looking out the nursery window and we saw Isabel——”

THE SECRET STAIRS

"I saw her first!" put in Betty.

"No, you didn't, Betty. I'm sure you didn't. Don't you remember I——"

"It doesn't make the slightest difference who saw her first." Miss Abby felt that she could not retain her self-control much longer. "I wish to know where she was and what she was doing. You were both at the nursery window, you say. Where was Isabel and what was she doing?"

"Yes, we were both up at the nursery window. I was at one window and Betty was at the other and it was 'most lunch time and——"

"Where was Isabel?" Miss Rodney's voice trembled. Were there ever such provoking children?

"I was just going to tell you, Aunt Abby," said Dorothy reproachfully. "She came out of the old kitchen."

"Out of the old kitchen?"

"Yes, she came right out of there and she had on her things and she went out the gate into the alley, and I guess she came down the secret stairs, for after lunch when we were playing, Betty and I thought we'd go see if she had left the little door in the old oven open, for we were just crazy to take a look up the stairs. And it was a little open, just a crack, but we didn't go up, Aunt Abby, really and truly we didn't. Did we, Betty?"

"WHERE IS ISABEL?"

"No, we just peeked," said Betty. "I didn't want to go up it was so dark in the old oven, but Dorothy wanted to."

"It grows more and more mysterious!" said Miss Rodney, turning to her sisters. "The secret stairs? Why should she do such a thing as that? If she were in the house, why didn't she come down in the usual way by the proper stairs?"

"I guess she wanted to escape," suggested Dorothy, with a glance at Betty.

"Escape from what? Why should our niece have any wish to escape?"

"Oh, they don't mean anything, Aunt Abby," interposed Peggy, hastily. "Come, children, it is time to go home now."

"Peggy, you are just trying to change the subject," said Dorothy, calmly. "We have a play, Betty and I, Aunt Abby. We think Isabel is a very interesting character. We have all along. We hoped at first, you know, that she was something queer and interesting, like a Czecho-Slovakian, but she wasn't. She's just plain American like anybody else, and it's only her aunt's husband who isn't. So we made up a play. We pretend—we're only making it up, you know—but we pretend you're very cruel to her and she has to escape from you! Isn't it thrilling? And we always have her come down the secret stairs and go out the garden gate into the alley! Isn't it queer

THE SECRET STAIRS

she did it to-day when we were watching? And we always pretend she goes to a ship and goes over to Spain to live with her Spanish aunt, and there she meets a prince or a duke or something and marries him. Oh, it's the greatest fun, especially the part on the steamer, going over!" Dorothy paused a moment. Then, in a voice that was impressive, "Perhaps she has done that very thing! Perhaps she is on the steamer now!"

"Dorothy, you are a perfect little goose!" exclaimed Peggy, wishing very much that she dared to laugh. It would never do, however, under the circumstances. In order to turn her thoughts from laughter, therefore, she spoke severely to her young sister. "You are frightening Aunt Abby very much. Of course, Isabel isn't escaping, as you call it. And your game is the silliest I ever heard of. Aunt Abby, you must excuse her!"

"Well, I like that, Peggy Duane!" exclaimed Dorothy, in great indignation. "You none of you ever would have known that Isabel went out the alley gate if we hadn't seen her, me and Betty. And now you're scolding hard. You're real mean, Peggy——"

"There, that will do, children," interposed Miss Rodney, feeling unable to bear their presence much longer. It was impossible to consider the situation with any intelligence while the Duanes were arguing

“WHERE IS ISABEL?”

like this! She was surprised to find that Margaret Duane was bringing them up so badly. Oh, these modern mothers, and still more modern children! “I am very much obliged to you all for coming at once to tell us. It is a great help to know she was seen going out. Now we will not keep you any longer, but if you hear anything, Peggy, of course you will let us know. Good-night!”

Feeling themselves dismissed, the three Duanes departed in perfect silence. Not until they had reached their own garden did they feel free to resume their argument precisely where it had been cut off.

The Misses Rodney, left to themselves, set themselves to the task of reassuring one another. It was strange, of course, and not to be accounted for, but no doubt Isabel, who would soon appear, would be able to explain everything to their satisfaction. In the meantime Miss Rodney would take off her things and telephone to a few more houses where there might be some news. While she was thus engaged, Lydia thought she would go up to the third floor and again look about. She had visited Isabel's room more than once during the hours of waiting. She would now go into the storeroom and examine the panel. She could scarcely believe this tale told by Dorothy and Betty. Of course, they would not be deliberately untruthful, but might they not have

THE SECRET STAIRS

imagined that they saw Isabel come out of the old kitchen?

She said nothing to her sisters, but went quietly upstairs and opening the door of the storeroom, she turned on the light. She looked across the room at the opposite wall. The secret panel was half open! She could scarcely believe that her eyes saw aright. She opened it farther and peered down the steep and narrow staircase. Something white lay upon one of the steps. She reached for it and found it to be a torn envelope. The stamp and part of the postmark were gone, but a portion of the address remained. It read thus:

“MISS ISABEL ROD—

“34—

“Bayp—

“Ma—”

It was in the handwriting of the former Mrs. Todd. There was no mistaking that handwriting.

Lydia closed the panel, turned out the light and left the storeroom. She went to her own room on the second floor and opening her desk, she placed in it the bit of paper. She would not show it yet to her sisters. They were sufficiently alarmed already. To judge by her own feelings, they would be doubly anxious upon seeing this envelope. What could it

“WHERE IS ISABEL?”

mean? Had the aunt sent for her to come and live with her after all? And had she gone? Preposterous though it had seemed, Dorothy's game might be in a measure true. Isabel might have run away a second time! For what other theory would account for her leaving by way of the secret stairs?

CHAPTER XVI

ISABEL MAKES A PROMISE

WHEN Isabel returned from school that day at twelve o'clock, she met the postman at the front gate, as Peggy had testified. He gave her the only letter that he had for the household. It was addressed to her in her Aunt Clara's unmistakable handwriting. She seized it eagerly and hurried into the house. She had heard nothing from the new *marchesa* since the date given for her sailing, and she had secretly been hoping for a detailed description of her aunt's first impressions of the castle in Spain, and of her new and highborn relatives. No doubt it was all in this letter. Without noticing the stamp or the postmark, she hurriedly tore it open, and sitting down in one of the big chairs in the hall, she began to read it.

"MY PRECIOUS BELLA," it ran. "How surprised you will be to hear I am still in this country and so near! I can hardly wait to see

ISABEL MAKES A PROMISE

you and to tell you of the awful disappointment that has come to your aunt who took care of you always and always loved you and always will, and I've got to see you right away. We only came last night and here we are."

Utterly bewildered, Isabel paused in her reading. Was not Aunt Clara in Spain after all? Where then was she? She looked at the postmark. It read "Boston!" And at the close of two well-filled sheets was given an address: "Rutland Square, Boston." Aunt Clara in this country, and of all places, in Boston! She began again to read the letter. She could scarcely wait to find out what it all meant.

"Dear Bella, I must see you at once, but you must manage to come without telling any one. I will tell you *everything*, but I do not want those proud highbrow Rodneys to know what has happened to me. I feel I cannot stand their scorn, but you I must see while I am so near, so come in secret and we can talk things over the way we did in the happy days of long ago when you and I were all in all and no one came between. The marquis, I mean your Uncle Zorolla, had business in Boston which brought us here and Friday he will be away all day; therefore, come Friday very early so that we can

THE SECRET STAIRS

have a talk and truly I will tell you *all*. Ask at the door for *Mrs. Zorolla*. Now remember, Bella, there is to be no telling the Rodneys where you have gone. You can manage somehow to get away. I shall never get over it if you tell them and I have had such trouble I cannot bear any more. Do not disappoint me. I will stay in *all day* until you come. *Do not tell*. I have a right to have you come for *I am your own aunt* and I brought you up. I have loved you *all your life*, and now I *need* you. Come Friday or I do not know what will happen. I am afraid I shall be ill. I have had trouble enough. I cannot bear more. Come at once to your suffering Aunt Clara."

Isabel finished reading the letter, folded it and placed it again in the envelope, wondering what she ought to do. Whatever she might decide upon (her quick mind at once grasped the situation), it would hardly be worth while to ask permission of her Aunt Abby to go to Boston alone to look for her Aunt Clara in a locality entirely unknown to her. Miss Rodney would certainly object strongly—would insist upon going with her or would no doubt refuse permission altogether. If she were to ask either one of her other aunts she would be referred to their eldest sister. Her uncle was the only per-

ISABEL MAKES A PROMISE

son who would have taken upon himself the necessary authority, and who would also have offered to go with her, but he was not at home. And even had he been there, her Aunt Clara had said, "Do not tell the Rodneys," and she had also said—and had heavily underlined the word—"I *need* you." That settled the matter for Isabel. She must go to Boston, even though she must go alone, to see and to comfort her poor, unhappy aunt in whatever the trouble was that had come to her. She would surely be able to return by one of the afternoon trains before her Rodney relatives would have time to notice her absence or to be seriously alarmed by it. She hoped to be at home again by four o'clock, but even if she did not appear until half past four, they would probably suppose that she had gone home after school with Mary Chisholm, or one of the other girls, as she occasionally did. It was great good fortune, she thought, that she had been dismissed so early from school, and that no one as yet knew that she was in the house. When she returned from Boston she would explain the whole situation. She would prevail upon her Aunt Clara to give her permission to do this, and, of course, Aunt Abby would finally understand and forgive her.

But how was she to get away without being seen? She went up to her room to plan her line of action while she made ready for the trip. It was going to

THE SECRET STAIRS

be an adventure, of that she was sure. Isabel's spirit sprang to meet an adventure. She almost forgot Aunt Clara's unknown trouble for a short time. She crept upstairs very softly. She did not know where her Rodney aunts were, and she did not wish to know. They might or might not be in the house, but she did not stop to find out, and reached her room on the third floor without meeting any one.

She found upon looking at a time-table in her room that a train left Bayport for Boston at one o'clock. It was now nearly half past twelve, and she must hurry. She still had on the hat and jacket which she wore to school and there was not time to change, so she must go dressed as she was. She opened her purse to examine the state of her finances, and found there a little over two dollars. That would easily pay her fare. She was already hungry, but she would no doubt be in time to have some lunch with her aunt, who would be only too delighted to take her somewhere to get it. That had been a favorite custom in the old days with Aunt Clara.

In a very short time Isabel was ready for her trip. But when she went out of her room she heard voices in the hall below. Miss Rodney herself was speaking, and right at the foot of the stairs!

"It is up in Philip's room," she said to some one. "I am sure I saw it there yesterday. I will go up and get it as soon as I have got out my fur coat."

ISABEL MAKES A PROMISE

Her fur coat was kept in the hall closet; it would not take long to get it out. Not a moment should be lost. Isabel must hide, although by so doing she might possibly lose the one o'clock train. She stepped quickly into the storeroom and softly closed the door. As she stood there wondering how she could manage to leave her hiding place, she remembered the secret stairs! The very thing! Adventure was certainly piling upon adventure. The question was, would she be able to find the spring? Phil had explained it to her, and she had once opened the panel herself; he had also told her that the spring which opened the door into the old oven at the foot of the stairs was below, and a little to the left of, a certain mark—a notch in the wall down there. He had been unable to find it in the dark on Thanksgiving night. It would be light enough now, she thought, for her to discover it, for there was a small window somewhere on the stairs. She crossed the storeroom with stealthy footsteps and felt for the secret spring. In a moment the panel moved. She opened the little door and passed through it just as her aunt's voice was again heard, and now Miss Rodney was speaking in the third-story hall. Isabel was but just in time.

She did not stop to fasten the little door behind her, but pushing it partly shut she hastened down the stairs, being careful, however, to make no noise. It

THE SECRET STAIRS

was by no means dark, for the brilliant day of sunshine upon the snow had its effect even upon those gloomy, ancient stairs. She found the spring at the lower opening with unexpected ease. She stepped out into the old oven, and in a moment was in the garden. She went through the gate into the alley, having seen no one, and presently was in the street that led to the station. She reached the station, bought a ticket, and very soon the train was carrying her to Boston and Aunt Clara.

She could scarcely realize that she was to see so soon again the aunt with whom her whole life until now had been spent, and who, instead of living in luxury and ease and high estate in a foreign land as she had supposed, was in such dire need of her, and close at hand in Boston. She wondered what the trouble was, and how she would be able to help her. It was all so unexpected and so mysterious that Isabel forgot entirely that she was doing something quite wrong in going to Boston without permission and in this manner. Her one idea was to get there, and the fact that her aunts in Bayport would have good reason to be alarmed, and also would be seriously annoyed with her, did not yet occur to her.

Isabel had been a number of times to Boston since she came to live in Bayport. She had been shown the State House, the Common and the Public Garden; she had visited Faneuil Hall, and the old North

ISABEL MAKES A PROMISE

Church, and the Art Museum, with her uncle. She had come up from Bayport twice with Aunt Lydia to do some Christmas shopping, and even Aunt Abby had spared the time from her many duties to take her to the Public Library and explain the Prophets to her. Her education had not been neglected. But in going with other people in this manner she had not learned her way about. Accustomed to the right angles of the streets of New York and of the cities she knew in the West, the streets in the older part of Boston bewildered her. She had not the least idea, that February day when she passed through the North Station and out into the street, of which way she should turn to find her aunt's hotel or boarding house.

The address given in the letter was "Rutland Square." Where was Rutland Square, and how should she get there? Of course, she could take a taxi and be carried straight to the place, but Isabel had by no means forgotten her experiences the day she first arrived in Boston. It would not do to use up her small stock of money on taxicabs, for there would be no Philip this time to appear suddenly before her and pay for her ticket to Bayport. Of course, her aunt would give her what she needed, but she might not find her after all. Prudence, therefore, compelled her to go by trolley, but the question was, which car should she take?

THE SECRET STAIRS

She decided to ask a policeman. He advised "the elevated" and told her where to get out. "It's way over in the South End," said he, "but the 'El' will take you there all right." His fatherly interest gave her renewed courage, and she thanked him and hurried up the stairs.

By some mischance, however, Isabel was carried far beyond her station. When she found herself looking down upon what seemed to be almost open country, she concluded that she had better ask a brakeman when they would reach the stopping place she wanted. She was told, as she had feared would be the case, that it had long since been left behind. They were now running into Forest Hills, the end of the route, and she must go down the stairs, and up on the other side, and there take another train back to town. As the station at which she should get out was in the heart of the city, this extra trip consumed a large amount of her precious time, and it was long after three o'clock when she finally reached Rutland Square.

It was a quaint, quiet part of old Boston, with trees and grass-plots that no doubt were pleasant enough in summer, but seemed dreary now. The old-fashioned brick houses with iron balconies and balustrades and steep front steps reminded her vividly of the old New York street in which she had last seen her Aunt Clara. It seemed so strange to

ISABEL MAKES A PROMISE

be looking for her again in a similar locality, though in so different a city, when she had supposed her to be in Madrid or Paris. Thinking of this as she went up the steps, having at last found the desired number, she actually asked, when the door was opened, if "Mrs. Todd" were at home.

"No such name here!" replied the slovenly young woman, firmly closing the door in her face.

"Wait! Wait!" exclaimed Isabel, suddenly remembering: "I mean Mrs. Zorolla! Isn't she at home?"

"Why didn't you say so then?" objected the maid, suspiciously. "Zorolla and Todd ain't much alike and——"

But she was cut short by cries of welcome from some one behind her.

"Bella, my darling child!" exclaimed a familiar voice. "I thought you'd never get here! I've been watching for hours at the window!"

And she was drawn into the house, past the reluctant and staring maid, and received into the embrace of Mrs. Zorolla, who was weeping and laughing and talking all at once, precisely as she had often done when she was Mrs. Todd.

"Oh, my precious child, it does me good just to see you! Why—why—but come upstairs where we can talk just as we used to do and I can tell you everything."

THE SECRET STAIRS

She led her to a shabby-looking room on the third floor. "This is what I have come down to! No more elegant hotels for your poor aunt!" She drew her in and closed the door. "Bella, I have been cruelly deceived! The marquis is not a marquis; he is not even a count, or anything else! He is nothing but plain mister! Never did I have such a blow. What do you think of that?"

"But—but——" faltered Isabel. "I don't understand, Aunt Clara! What is he then? Hasn't he any castle in Spain?"

"He hasn't even a *cottage* in Spain! Not even a hut! What is more he has never been there in his life. He is a South American! He was born in Chile!"

The aunt and niece sat facing each other. As usual, Aunt Clara was in a rocking-chair, and, as usual, when strongly affected by her emotions, she tilted it violently to and fro. Isabel looked at her in silence. Such news was overwhelming, and she scarcely knew how to meet it. She had never trusted the so-called marquis, as her aunt well knew, but she hesitated to say, "I told you so!" There seemed, therefore, to be nothing to say.

Presently Mrs. Zorolla continued her story: "I never suspected anything was wrong until the time came for sailing. Then he told me we were not going to Spain. Imagine my feelings! He explained

ISABEL MAKES A PROMISE

(very beautifully, I must confess) that he had invented his title and his castle and everything, and instead of Spain, it would be Chile. Oh, Bella child, your poor aunt! Only Mrs. Zorolla, no better than Todd, if as good, in this country, anyway. But I have forgiven him entirely. He had his reasons for his deceit. Very good ones, too. He saw no other way to win me! Now here we are most unexpectedly in Boston, for his business takes him flying about considerably, and they are having a sort of Convention here of South American business men, and that is what he is. He is lunching to-day at the Copley Plaza, that big hotel, very swell. I knew he would be gone all day, and it would be a good chance to see you. We are off again to-night and sail next week. My, but it's good to see you! You look awfully plain, child, compared to the way you used to look when I had the dressing of you. My, what a plain hat! How are you getting along? Do those Rodneys treat you decent?"

"Why, of course they do, Aunt Clara!" exclaimed her niece. "They are very, very good to me. I love them dearly already, and it is all exactly as if I had lived with them always."

"Well, that's a pretty thing for you to say!" Mrs. Zorolla was visibly annoyed, and her chair began again to rock. "Of all things to say to me, who brought you up!"

THE SECRET STAIRS

"I thought you would be glad to hear it," said Isabel quietly.

"Well, there's one thing I want to know. Do they say things against your mother?"

"Oh, no!"

"Well, I'm glad of that! And what's the boy like? Has he been nice to you?"

"Phil? Why, of course he has been nice to me! He is my brother."

"Only a half. There was no knowing what he would say to your coming there to live. He might have been sort of nasty to you."

It crossed Isabel's mind that nothing of this kind had been suggested when Mrs. Todd decided that the time had come for her to go to Bayport to live, but she said nothing. She continued to look at her aunt. How very different she was in appearance from her Rodney relatives!

"My goodness, child, how you do stare! You act as if you'd never laid eyes on me before. I haven't half told you things I want to talk over with you. I thought you'd never get here, and we've hardly any time now. Zorolla will be back before we get started."

"Could we go somewhere and get something to eat, Aunt Clara?" Isabel ventured to say. "I haven't had any lunch. I didn't get your letter until nearly

ISABEL MAKES A PROMISE

half past twelve, and it was just luck that I got it then. I hadn't time to eat anything before I came, and I'm so very hungry."

"You poor child!" Mrs. Zorolla looked distressed. "My, I wish I could take you out and get you something good the way I used to do in the happy days before—before—well, the way we used to have good times. My, but things have changed for me! Well, you see it's this way, dearie. There used to be only you and me, just us two, as independent as possible, and all the money we needed, to spend as we liked. Of course, being married again makes it different. I can't do just as I like always. The truth is, your Uncle Zorolla keeps charge of the money. He says it's safer that way, and I don't know but what he's right. You know I spend a lot when I get going. He says he never knew anything like it, and he had better have the cash in his keeping. Of course, it makes me dreadfully short, and I give you my word, Bella child, that unless you've got enough yourself in your purse, I haven't got the right change for buying you anything to-day. Another day I'd have more, of course."

Isabel was so surprised by this confession of the state of her aunt's finances that she could not speak. Aunt Clara with an empty purse? What could it mean? Her aunt hastened to change the subject.

THE SECRET STAIRS

There were some facts which she did not intend to have Isabel know.

"But I've just remembered! I've got some crackers and a little pot of something or other, potted chicken, I think. We'll have a little picnic lunch. And there's a bit of chocolate, too. We just have rooms here and go out for our meals, except breakfast. When Zorolla don't get back for lunch I have little odds and ends like that. And here's some doughnuts. You won't mind their being a bit stale, I know. And while you're eating, I'll talk."

Her conversation consisted chiefly in entreating Isabel not to tell her Rodney relatives where she had been. "Of course, you can say you came to Boston; you will have to do that, I suppose, though I am sure I let you do pretty much what you liked always. I never knew what you did when I was off all day there in New York when the marquis began to be attentive. Dear me, how little I knew he wasn't one, after all! But as I was saying, a girl of fourteen ought to be allowed to come to Boston from the country alone when she likes."

"They don't think so, Aunt Clara. You see, Bayport girls are—well, they are different. Of course, they come to Boston alone in the daytime, and if they are used to it, but it will be long after dark, I am afraid, when I go down to the North

ISABEL MAKES A PROMISE

Station, and I don't know my way yet around Boston. And my aunts are very particular about everything like that. You see, they are so very different from you, Aunt Clara."

"I should say they were! Mighty different, and you're getting that way yourself already. I never should have thought you'd change so in such a short time. You don't look like the same girl, and as for the way you talk! You're a regular highbrow already. And living in the country, too!"

Isabel laughed merrily. She felt more cheerful now that she had had something to eat, and she was amused with her aunt's comments. "Bayport isn't the country," she said. "It is a city, only there are gardens and trees. It is a very attractive place. I love it already, and I love our old house. But I didn't know I had changed. It is only the way I do my hair, Aunt Clara. I haven't changed a bit inside!"

"Well, I'm not so sure about that. You look to me different all the way through," replied Mrs. Zorolla doubtfully. "I suppose I've got to expect it, the Rodneys being so exactly the opposite to us. Give me the West, every time. I can't stand airs. Not that you're airish yet, Bella child. I'm not saying that; but it wouldn't surprise me if you got so. Well, I suppose I can't say anything now. I made my bed and I've got to lie in it, as the old saying is.

THE SECRET STAIRS

And I'm satisfied. Of course, I am sorry not to be in the nobility as I had every reason to expect, but I'm going to see the world, even if it is only South America instead of Spain. You know I always did like traveling about. Now, I hate to hurry you, child, for there is no knowing when I'll lay eyes on you again, but your uncle may come in at any minute now, and he's got an awful quick temper. He don't mean anything serious, but if things don't go his way he's just as likely as not to flare right up. It is kind of foreign, of course, and it keeps me sort of uneasy—but la, you can't have everything, and I'm not expecting you can! Now, this is the last time I shall ever ask anything of you, probably, Bella, for I won't be coming up to the States, as he calls it, again. He may come on business, he says, but when I once get way down to Chile I'll most likely have to stay there. And so I want you to promise that you won't tell the Rodneys you've seen me. If you told them you had, they'd find out he wasn't a marquis, sure as fate. Promise!"

She threw her arms around the girl's neck in her old, impulsive way, which seemed so natural. Isabel was again the little girl, old for her years in many ways and tenderly caring for her kindly, selfish aunt, but at the same time considered only a child by Aunt Clara, and bound to do only as she commanded.

ISABEL MAKES A PROMISE

"The last time, Bella child! Please, please promise!"

And, of course, Isabel gave the promise. They were both crying when they parted at the front door. Mrs. Zorolla went out on the steps and glanced in both directions. "You'd better hurry!" she said. "I'd no idea it was getting so dark. If you meet your uncle, don't stop to speak to him. He'll never know you, you look so different, and you'd better not! Besides, it's getting dark and you've got to get a train. Hurry, child, and don't forget you've promised!"

CHAPTER XVII

MYSTERY

MRS. ZOROLLA had pleaded with Isabel "not to forget," but there was no danger that the girl would do so. She could think of nothing else. What she did forget, however, was her way back to the North Station. She hurried along the quiet street and turned into one that was very wide, and above which the trains of the elevated road were thundering, and she turned in the wrong direction. At that moment she caught sight of her aunt's husband.

He came toward her in the midst of a number of persons, for the street was crowded. The bright light of a big electric street lamp shone full upon his face—that face, dark, sinister and unpleasing, which she had so disliked and which she had hoped never to see again. It was a mean face, and the sight of it made her still more sorry for her Aunt Clara. She hoped that he had not recognized her.

MYSTERY

Poor Aunt Clara! She would surely never see her again, away off in Chile. It seemed even farther away than Spain. It saddened her, too, to think how grievously disappointed her aunt must be, for there was evidently more behind her story than the mere loss of a title. She was apparently quite poor. What had become of the money which she had been able to spend so freely in the past, and which had always been so plentiful? Probably only Mr. Zorolla (she would never call him uncle) could answer that question! There was no possible way for Isabel to help her aunt, she thought, but there was one thing that she could do to oblige her. She would not tell her family why she went to Boston.

She walked on and on, not knowing where she was going. Forgetting that she should take a train on the elevated, she had left the street it was on. After a time it occurred to her that it would be rather safer to ask her way, but whom could she ask? There was no one near. Then she heard hurrying footsteps behind her, and she looked back, wondering if she might venture to inquire of this person, whoever it was. She found that it was Zorolla himself!

"I thought so! You have changed somewhat in appearance, but I recognized you," was his greeting. How she detested his voice and his strong foreign accent! His manner, however, was extremely cour-

THE SECRET STAIRS

teous. "I thought it was our dear niece! And what may you be doing in this part of Boston? Ah! Ah! I well know. We have been to see our aunt, have we not? So she wrote the letter after all, did she? Well, well! And where may you be going, my niece?"

"I am going home, but I am afraid I have taken the wrong turning. Perhaps you can tell me where to find a car to get to the North Station?" Her voice was trembling, and she could hardly speak.

"Easily, most easily! You are not rejoiced to see me, eh? You never were. But why not? Am I not your uncle now? I will show you the way, and while we make the approach, we will converse, eh? We will reach an agreement."

It occurred to her that for some reason Zorolla was himself alarmed. Of course, such an idea was absurd, for how could she possibly do him harm? And yet his face showed concern, and his smooth-spoken words and cringing manner were so unlike his former patronizing way of speaking to her that she could not imagine what was behind them. It did not occur to her in her ignorance that he was uneasy lest his masquerading as a Spanish nobleman would be found out before he left the country. In Boston he was a business man from Valparaiso, which was the truth. No one in the United States had known him as a Spanish marquis save Mrs.

MYSTERY

Todd and her friends. By using a little caution, he had found it perfectly simple in New York to gain possession of the much-needed Todd money.

"We will make a little agreement, eh?" he continued; "I will put you on a car, and you, in turn, will make me one promise, eh? You will not tell your family, not your kind uncle in Bayport, nor your three charming aunts, nor yet your brother,—not one of them will you inform of our being here. To them we have gone to Spain, see? There is no necessity for them to be told that our destination has been changed, you understand. Will you do as I request?"

"Indeed, I will," replied Isabel, relieved to find that this was all that he required of her. "I wasn't going to tell anyhow. Aunt Clara asked me not to, and, of course, I wouldn't on her account. I promised her."

"Ah, indeed! Hm! Well, well! That then is all as it should be. You are a nice little girl, and obedient. I will now point out the car you will take. In it you will finally reach the subway, and thence to the North Station. I have been in this city before and I know much about railways. I have traveled much in this country. Here we are." He signaled a surface car. "*Addio, Isabella!* Remember you have given me, too, your promise."

There was no time for more. She stepped on to

THE SECRET STAIRS

the car platform and fortunately found a seat inside very easily, for the crowds at this hour were going the other way. For some time her only feeling was one of exultation. At last she was on her way home, and she need never again see that odious South American husband of Aunt Clara. She had not the slightest desire to tell her Rodney relatives anything about him. She was rather glad, on the whole, to be bound to silence so far as they were concerned. It was not until, after many delays, she finally reached the station and found how late it was, that she began to wonder what she could tell them to excuse her absence. For the first time it came over her that some explanation would surely be demanded. What could she say? She could not invent a reason. Not only would it have been impossible to avoid being found out, but she would have scorned to tell a lie. Isabel, with all her faults, was absolutely truthful. Any form of deceit was foreign to her nature. The only course for her to take, therefore, was to keep perfectly silent. This, she knew, would lead to all kinds of difficulties. Her aunts would have every excuse for being seriously displeased with her, and they were all so good to her that she was distressed at the thought. Uncle Charles, even, would look sorry, although he would say little. They would probably all leave it to Aunt Abby to put into words, but they would look their disapproval. Isabel be-

MYSTERY

came more and more depressed as the train drew nearer to Bayport.

There was but one station more to be passed, and she had reached the point of feeling that if she could not tell some one her troubles she would be unable to bear them, when she heard a familiar voice. She had been sitting with her elbow upon the window sill and her head leaning upon her hand while she gazed out into the night, but she saw nothing. She had noticed no one in the car and had, indeed, forgotten that there were other passengers. She turned with a start of surprise, therefore, to find Mary Chisholm standing in the aisle.

"What are you doing out so late, Isabel?" asked Mary, as surprised as Isabel was herself. "We are sitting 'way back there, mother and I, and we had no idea you were here. I got up just now to let some one sit with mother she wanted to speak to, and then I saw you." By this time Mary had taken the vacant seat next to Isabel. She turned to her with concern. "How do you happen to be so late, Isabel? And what is your Aunt Abby thinking of to let you come home from Boston at this hour all by your lonesome, as Phil would say?"

"She doesn't know I'm doing it," sighed Isabel miserably. "Oh, Mary, I'm so thankful to see you! I just couldn't have borne it another minute!"

"I thought something must be the matter. I

THE SECRET STAIRS

never saw anything so dejected as you look. What's the trouble? Out with it, quick, or we'll get to Bayport before you have time."

"Oh, Mary darling, I do wish I could, but I don't see how it's possible. You're such a comfortable person!"

"You make me feel like a down pillow or a feather bed, or some such soft and mushy object," laughed Mary, who thought Isabel had better be diverted and made to laugh, too.

But no smile even glimmered upon her friend's face. She turned again and looked at her narrowly. "I can't imagine what the matter is, Isabel, but really hadn't you better tell me?"

"I don't see how I can, though I want to dreadfully. But they said—he said—they said I mustn't say a word to a single one of the family. He—he—sort of made a bargain with me about showing me the way to the station, and it would be most awfully dishonest if I were to tell."

"Did you promise not to tell *any one*?" asked Mary, after a moment's thought. Who could it have been who forced her to promise this, and why should this mysterious "he" have done so?

"Yes, I said I wouldn't. I promised both him and my—at least, I almost promised both. They—they don't either of them want any of the Rodney family to—to—oh, don't ask me any more, Mary darling!

MYSTERY

I'm almost telling you, and it would be so dishonorable after he showed me the car and told me how to come and I promised."

"But you say you only promised not to tell your family. You didn't say anything about any one else, did you?"

Isabel considered this in silence. Had not both her aunt and her husband specified only the Rodneys?

"Because if that was all," continued Mary, "you know I'm not the family. I'm not even the remotest kind of a cousin to you. Wouldn't it be all right for you to tell me? It is such a relief always to talk things over with somebody."

"Oh, I know it is! I wish I could, but even that doesn't seem quite right. I'm afraid I can't, Mary. You see, if he hadn't told me how to come I shouldn't be here now, so it wouldn't be right for me not to keep my part of it. And I am so afraid if I told you he would find out in some way—he is so awfully sly and sharp! I never trusted him. I knew poor Aunt Cl—— at least, I always was afraid of him."

"Then it was some one you knew who showed you the way?"

"Why, of course! But don't ask me any more, Mary."

"I won't, dear, about that. But if you don't

THE SECRET STAIRS

mind telling me something else, I should be so glad. What time did you go to Boston?"

"At one o'clock. You see, I got the letter—at least—I found I had to go as soon as I got home from school. I had to hurry, but I just got that train."

"And didn't you tell your aunts you were going?"

"Oh, no! I couldn't tell them, or they would have stopped me. I hated to do it that way, but I couldn't help it. You see the letter—at least—well, it was a letter I got from—from some one—it said I mustn't tell my aunts I was coming."

"Was the letter from some one you know well?" asked Mary, becoming more and more puzzled.

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Isabel, smiling in spite of her anxiety. "I—I know her very well!"

"But how did you get away without any one's seeing you?"

There was an instant's silence. Then: "I went down the secret stairs."

"Why, Isabel!"

And at that moment the brakeman shouted, "Bayport," and the train came to a stop. Mary's face was troubled. There was certainly no time for further conversation, but knowing the habits of the Misses Rodney as she did, she felt that they must be seriously alarmed by now. If Isabel persisted in keeping silence, what would they think of her strange

MYSTERY

conduct? Somehow to Mary the secret stairs seemed the finishing touch. Isabel would never be able to atone for that way of going in her Aunt Abby's opinion, however the rest of the family might regard it. Miss Rodney would surely never overlook that part of the escapade. Who could the people be—evidently a man and a woman—who had enough influence over Isabel to make her come secretly to Boston, and could then force her to keep it a secret? Mary thought this over in anxious silence as the three walked up from the station together, for Mrs. Chisholm insisted upon going with Isabel as far as the Rodneys' gate. They watched until the front door was opened to her, and she disappeared into the lighted hall within.

At the sound of the doorbell the Rodneys, assembled in the living room in anxious consultation, had with one accord risen to their feet. Even Miss Phœbe left her easy chair and stood waiting. The Professor, who had been at home only long enough to hear the bare fact of his niece's disappearance, hurried to open the door without waiting for the maid, and his sisters followed him into the hall. And then Isabel stepped through the old doorway.

"Here she is!" cried her uncle joyfully. "Here's our little runaway! We were just going to send the town crier after you, Isabel! Come right in and give an account of yourself. Have you had supper?"

THE SECRET STAIRS

Isabel smiled up at him. "Not a bite!" she answered. Then she looked beyond at Aunt Abby's face. There was no smile there, and only the faint suggestion of one on that of Aunt Lyd.

"Where have you been, Isabel?" asked Miss Rodney.

"I—I had to go to Boston, Aunt Abby."

"'Had to'?"

"Yes, I—I had to."

"Why?"

"I—I—can't exactly explain. I—just had to."

Before Miss Rodney could find words in which to express her indignation at this reply, Miss Phœbe intervened. She stood in the doorway of the living room. "I think Isabel should have her supper before we ask her anything, Abby. She must be very hungry. Please oblige me by giving her something to eat as soon as you can."

"Phœbe! What are you doing, standing there without anything to lean on?" exclaimed Miss Abby. "Your poor nerves—you know how you are going to suffer for this excitement we have all had! Go right back to the sofa." She hurried to lead her to it, and while she was for the moment occupied, Lydia exchanged a meaning glance with her brother. Then she took Isabel's hand and drew her into the dining room, while the Professor followed Abby and closed the living room door behind him. He knew that

MYSTERY

eventually he and Phœbe together would succeed in calming their eldest sister, but it would be better if Isabel did not hear the discussion.

Miss Lydia did not ask a single question. The food which had been kept hot was brought in and placed upon the table, and Isabel ate it almost in silence. Her aunt made a few casual remarks, but not until the girl had finished and had risen from the table was anything said upon the subject of her extraordinary absence.

"I hope, my dear, that you are going to tell us something," said Aunt Lyd, putting her arms around Isabel. "We have all been very anxious about you."

Isabel hid her face for a minute on her aunt's shoulder. "Oh, Aunt Lyd, I'm so sorry I had to do it! I know it was awful of me, and—and you're all so good to me and—and I thought you were all getting a little fond of me and now you'll never understand, and—and——"

"My dear child, it will all come right in time," whispered her aunt. "Of course, we don't understand now, but things will straighten out, I'm sure. They always do, especially if—if you pray about it, Isabel."

"I know, darling Aunt Lyd! I do—I have—coming home in the train, to know what I had better say, and just after that Mary came and sat with me, and I didn't even know she was on the train. Wasn't

THE SECRET STAIRS

that wonderful? I had been praying hard for some one to help me, and she came!"

"And did you tell her where you had been?"

"Oh, no, I couldn't do that, of course! It didn't seem right. But she sort of helped me. Mary is such a friendly person, you know, and you always feel as if she would understand without a whole lot of explaining. You are that kind, too, Aunt Lyd!"

"Thank you, my dear! Now we must go to the others, but remember, Isabel, that we were not unreasonable in being worried about you, and are not now in expecting you to give some little account of yourself!"

"I know, but I don't see how I am going to do it without breaking my promise!"

Her aunt glanced at her quickly. So she had made a promise! Then together they returned to the living room, the door of which now stood open.

Isabel walked straight up to her Aunt Abby, and stood in front of her. "I'm very sorry, Aunt Abby," she said. "I know what I did looks awfully wrong. I don't see how you will ever get over it. If I could tell you why I did it, perhaps you might forgive me, but you see I can't tell you."

"You can't tell us?" repeated her aunt. "Why can't you?"

"Because I promised not to."

"But, Isabel, you must! This is perfectly un-

MYSTERY

heard-of! However you were brought up, it is certain that you must have learned since you came here that girls of fourteen cannot do precisely as they like."

Isabel made no reply. Her uncle was the next to speak. "Come sit here, my dear," he said, drawing a chair nearer to his own. "Your aunts have been worried all the afternoon. They didn't even know that you got out of school early. Did you come home at all?"

"Oh, yes, Uncle Charles! I didn't know I had to go until I got home and—and then I found I had to. It just happened that way, you see."

"How did you manage to get in and out without being seen? Were you trying to hide?"

"Oh, no! At least not when I came in, Uncle Charles, because, you see, I didn't know then I had to go. When I went upstairs after—when I went upstairs no one was around, and then—I—I—no one saw me go out."

"Did you come down the front stairs again?"

"No, Uncle Charles."

"How did you come down?"

"I came down the secret stairs, and went out through the alley."

"You were trying to hide, then?"

"Yes, Uncle Charles."

There was a moment of silence in the room. Then

THE SECRET STAIRS

Miss Rodney said just three words: "History repeats itself!"

Isabel turned to her. "I suppose you mean I have done something like Mamma, Aunt Abby. Are you never going to tell me what it was Mamma did?"

Miss Rodney, taken by surprise, had no answer ready. Before she found one, Miss Phœbe again intervened.

"I think you should be told the whole story, Isabel. I quite agree with you. I will tell you myself to-morrow, if your uncle is willing. Abby, I know what you are going to say, but I should like to be the one to do it. And now I will get you to help me upstairs. We have our dear child at home again safe and sound, and I, for one, am very thankful. We won't scold her any more to-night, will we? To-morrow when we are all rested, things will get straightened out. Good-night everybody! Sister Abby, I should like your arm, please. Lydia, don't let Isabel sit up another minute. You take her up to bed, and Abby will take me."

Miss Rodney highly disapproved of this course, but on account of Phœbe's nerves, liable she thought to give way at any minute, she felt constrained to obey. She led her invalid sister, to whom she was devoted, from the room. When they had gone, Isabel turned to her uncle and her Aunt Lydia.

"I do think you are the most perfect people!" she

MYSTERY

exclaimed, in the impulsive, outspoken way they had grown to love. "Most aunts and uncles would have scolded most dreadfully, I'm dead certain sure! You don't know the least bit about what I did, and yet you're trusting me! Oh, I do wish I could tell you! Perhaps some way will come in which I can, though it seems perfectly hopeless now. Perhaps Aunt Phœbe is right and things will straighten out tomorrow. Oh, I hope they will!"

Her uncle held her in his arms for a moment when she bade him good-night. "My dear," he said, "we do trust you. But just remember this. Sometimes duties seem to conflict, and I want you to remember that it is not always one's duty to do the harder of two things. Now, my dear, good-night, and remember, too, that we do trust you."

CHAPTER XVIII

PEGGY AND MARY TO THE RESCUE!

THE next day being Saturday, there was no school. When Isabel came down to breakfast, she wished that it were Monday or Tuesday—in fact, any day of the week but Saturday, for in that case the cross-examination which she felt sure her Aunt Abby intended to make might have been deferred at least until the afternoon. Isabel, after lying awake for several hours, had slept heavily and then had waked to a sense of there being something very wrong. She was unhappy, but at first she could not remember why. What was it? And then, with an overwhelming rush, the troubles and adventures of the day before came back to her. Because of that miserable promise she would never be able to explain her mysterious absence. She would be obliged to go through the rest of her life knowing that her aunts, whom she had grown to love and whose good opinion she longed to have, were not satisfied, however much they might appear to trust

PEGGY AND MARY TO THE RESCUE

her. It was the trust in her which they showed which made her so unhappy. Even Aunt Abby, considering the real anxiety she had suffered, had reproached her very little. No one had scolded her. They had all been kind. It made her cry to think how truly kind they had all proved themselves to be. But she had promised, she told herself; she had given her word, and she could not break it. She must take the consequences.

Breakfast was usually a rather quiet meal at the Rodneys'. The Professor had his paper, and beyond comments upon the weather and the news announced in the headlines, there was not much conversation. When Isabel had finished hers—she had no appetite that morning—she turned to her aunt.

“What would you like to have me do this morning, Aunt Abby?” she asked, rather timidly.

“When you have tidied up your room, you had better go out and get some fresh air.” Miss Rodney's manner was brisk, but not unkind. “You look as if you needed some, and you have eaten scarcely anything. At half past ten I should like to speak to you. Please be prompt, for I have an engagement at half past eleven.”

Isabel left the house, not knowing exactly which way she should go and without thinking much about it. As she passed the Duanes', an energetic tapping on the window pane made her look up, and there was

THE SECRET STAIRS

Peggy, beckoning vigorously. She threw open the window and called down to Isabel.

"Are you deaf, dumb or blind, or all three? I thought you would never look up. Where are you going, why, and what for?"

"I don't know."

"Time you did, or you'll get lost again. You need a keeper, Isabel. I'll be it! Hold on a minute till I get my things on. Now don't dare to go wherever you're going without me."

Isabel was quite willing to wait, and in a few minutes Peggy was ready and the two started forth.

"Now tell me the whole story," she said. "I want to hear every word of your adventure yesterday. I suppose that letter the postman gave you had something to do with it all. I happened to look back just as you met him at your gate, and I saw him hand you one. Now go ahead!"

Isabel stopped short in the street and looked at her. "But I can't tell you, Pegs!"

"Well, I never heard the beat of that! Of course you're going to tell me! I am your cousin, so to speak, and your most intimate friend. I shall be most frightfully offended if you don't, so there now! Fire away!"

"Why, Peggy darling, you don't understand in the least! I can't tell you. I only wish I could, but I promised."

PEGGY AND MARY TO THE RESCUE

"Promised who?" demanded Peggy, with a fine disregard for good English.

"My—her—the—oh, I can't tell you! I simply can't explain. It is all too dreadful, and I am terribly unhappy. Everything always seems to go wrong, and I am sure it always will with me. And I've got such a bad kind of a morning before me. Aunt Abby wants to see me at half past ten and I won't be able to tell her a single thing she wants to know."

"Has she scolded you very hard?"

"No, she hasn't! She doesn't like it a bit, of course, and she was awfully worried about me yesterday, but she didn't say half as much as she might have."

"That is a wonder, for just your going down the secret stairs must have made her nearly frantic."

Isabel was silent for a minute, thinking over this remark of Peggy's. "I am to hear to-day why Aunt Abby is so queer about those stairs," she said at last. "Aunt Phœbe has promised to tell me about Mamma, and I am sure it has something to do with them. But, Peggy, I don't understand! How did you know I went down those stairs yesterday? Have you heard about them already? Did they tell your mother when they telephoned her I had come home?"

"Oh, no, my dear child, they never mentioned them! But they knew you went out that way long

THE SECRET STAIRS

before you got home, for we told them so! Dot and Betty saw you go, and when there was all that hue and cry about your being lost, mother sent us in to tell the aunts. Of course, they were terribly upset over that, and no wonder, Isabel darling! It certainly did look kind of queer."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Isabel. "I shall never be able to explain, and you'll all go on always thinking me very queer and different from the rest of you here in Bayport, just as I had begun to hope you wouldn't any more! Except you and Mary, I am sure everybody does, and after last night I am afraid Mary does."

"But how does Mary know anything about last night?" demanded Peggy, quickly. "The Chisholms were away till quite late. Mother tried to get Mrs. Chisholm on the telephone ever so many times and they didn't answer, and we said after you got home all right that it wasn't worth while to tell them anything about it."

"They were on the train with me, and Mary came and sat with me the last part of the way. I had to tell her a little, for I was so worried, but I didn't tell her much."

"Oh!" said Peggy, and then became silent. This bit of information had given her an idea.

When the two girls came home from their walk, Isabel felt better able to face the ordeal that was

PEGGY AND MARY TO THE RESCUE

before her. The fresh air, and Peggy's sprightly conversation had done her good. Peggy had tried to be entertaining, and with such success that Isabel actually found herself laughing at one of her absurd jokes. She became sober again instantly, but Peggy had noticed with some triumph that she really had succeeded in diverting her cousin's mind for one minute at least. She bade her a cheerful good-by when they reached the Duanes' gate.

"Good luck to you, old girl!" she called back to her. "It's always darkest just before dawn!" She waited in the hall until Isabel had had time to get to her own door, and then she hurriedly left the house again. Evidently "Square Pegs" had some important business on hand. She did not pass the Rodney house, but hastened in the opposite direction. Had she met any one of her intimates they would surely have put to her the question, "What's up now?" But, fortunately, she met no one whom she knew.

It was not yet time for the dreaded interview with Aunt Abby when Isabel went into the house. In fact, it was only a quarter of ten, and as Aunt Abby kept her appointments to the minute, and expected others to do the same, there were yet three quarters of an hour to be disposed of, and Isabel wondered what she could do. She did not wish to go out again, and there were no lessons to study then, even had she been able to fix her mind upon them. Monday would

THE SECRET STAIRS

be February 22, which, of course, was a holiday, and it was possible that on Tuesday also there would be no school, for the holiday would delay repairs to the heating apparatus. She went slowly up to her room, at a loss to know how to make use of her time. And then, just when she had decided that she could not endure waiting another minute, there was a tap upon her door. It was Aunt Lydia.

Isabel was especially fond of this aunt. From the first moment of seeing her—indeed, earlier than that, when she had read her letter away off in New York before she had even met her—she had loved Aunt Lyd, who seemed somehow to be on the same level with her nephew and niece. She could look at things more as they did than the older aunts could do. She came into the room smiling affectionately at Isabel.

“Darling child, don’t worry so! It is all coming out right, I’m sure!” she said. “Aunt Phœbe wants you to come down now and hear about your father and mother. There is plenty of time before Aunt Abby gets back. She has gone to market, you know, and has other errands, too. So come right down, and we will have a nice talk in Aunt Phœbe’s room. She is so anxious to be the one to tell you. I don’t believe you realize at all how much better Aunt Phœbe has been since you came to live with us.”

Isabel looked gratefully at her aunt. “It is dear of you to tell me that now, Aunt Lyd!” she whis-

PEGGY AND MARY TO THE RESCUE

pered. "I was just thinking I had brought nothing but trouble."

"Nonsense, child! You are positively morbid! Don't ever allow yourself to think such a thing again! And as for yesterday, I feel perfectly sure everything is coming out all right. I woke up this morning absolutely certain of that!"

Aunt Phœbe's room was a cheerful place that bright February morning. The sun streamed in at the windows, and Aunt Phœbe herself, in her pretty and becoming wrapper with its dainty lace, and a covering of fleecy wool thrown across her knees, was a charming sight. Aunt Phœbe was still pretty, in spite of her years of ill health, and she and her room were always arranged in perfect neatness. She was seated in a large armchair near one of the windows.

"Good-morning, Isabel!" she said, holding out her hand. "I'm taking my morning sun bath. I'm glad to see you, dear. Sit right down in this chair near me, and Lyd, get your work and we'll be a nice cozy little party while I tell Isabel a story."

She was silent for a few minutes while they obeyed her, and Isabel found it difficult to speak after she had greeted her aunt. She was to hear at last the story which ever since she could remember anything at all she had longed to know—a story which concerned her more than any one else in the whole

THE SECRET STAIRS

world. For the moment it crowded her troubles out of her mind. It gave her something else to think of, which was the very condition which her Aunt Phœbe in her wisdom had desired to bring about. Aunt Phœbe had learned much during her long period of invalidism. It was not in vain that she had endured her suffering.

"I am going to begin at the beginning," she said, "and in the old-fashioned way. 'Once upon a time' there came to Bayport from the far West a very beautiful girl. She was one of the loveliest creatures I have ever seen, and her name was Isabel Owen. She came to be a governess in the house of some friends of ours, and she was so sweet and lovable that they soon looked upon her as one of the family. Your Uncle Charles went often to the house, for he was intimate there, having been the classmate and friend of Mr. Goodwin. He fell in love with Isabel, and became engaged to her, although he was much older; fully fifteen years older than she was."

"Uncle Charles was once engaged to Mamma!" exclaimed Isabel, under her breath. Her aunt heard her, and caught also her startled look.

"Yes, he was, and he was perfectly devoted to her. Have you never known a word of this, my dear?"

"Never, Aunt Phœbe! No one has ever told me a single word. Is that why Uncle Charles has been so dear to me?"

PEGGY AND MARY TO THE RESCUE

"One reason, but not the only one. He has grown very fond of you for your own sake, too."

"I'm glad of that," said Isabel, smiling contentedly. "There is no one like Uncle Charles!"

"I agree with you! But I will go on with my story. After they became engaged, Isabel gave up her position, and we invited her to come here and make us a long visit before she went home to get ready to be married. We had Philip here, a little fellow, a mere baby. His father—your father—had made his home with us since the death of Phil's mother. She died when her baby was only a few days old, as you know, and your Aunt Abby took charge of him at once. Your father went abroad not long afterward, leaving him with us. He was gone nearly three years, and it was while he was away that Isabel, your mother, came to Bayport, so he had never seen her until he came home while she was staying with us. Well, my dear, the inevitable happened! My brother Philip was years younger than Charles, and very handsome and charming. Every one who knew him liked him. Charles has never blamed either of them, although it was a terrible blow to him. It came very suddenly. Your mother was an impulsive creature. It was one of her charms, indeed. You have it in your nature, too, Isabel. You must be careful to keep it in check. Your father had it, too."

THE SECRET STAIRS

She was silent a moment.

"Shall I tell Isabel the rest of the story, Phœbe?" asked Lydia. She glanced somewhat anxiously at her sister.

"No, I want to tell her all. Thank you, Lyd, but I am sure I can. One day, Isabel, your mother, did not come down to dinner, and none of us had seen her all that morning, although we were about the house downstairs. We sent up to her room, and found she was not there. Later we discovered that she had left the house, and she had gone by way of the secret stairs. She went to the Chisholms', who were living then in the old family home. She sent us word from there at once. She said that she left us in that way because she felt so badly that she could not meet us. In a way it was natural for her to do it. She evidently made up her mind to go very suddenly, and on the impulse of the moment, secretly left the house. From there she went back to her own home. We had another letter the next day, and so did your Uncle Charles. I have never heard him utter one word of blame, Isabel, but he has never been quite the same since."

Isabel sat perfectly still, her eyes fixed upon her aunt's face. The story was totally different from what she had imagined. At last she asked a question. She had been considering the matter carefully while she sat so still, and she was puzzled.

PEGGY AND MARY TO THE RESCUE

"Poor Uncle Charles! That is why Aunt Abby has never liked me very much, of course, because she adores Uncle Charles and blamed Mamma. But I don't understand something, Aunt Phœbe. Aunt Abby—why does Aunt Abby only blame Mamma? Wasn't it my father's fault, too?"

The two aunts exchanged an amused glance. Aunt Lydia laughed openly.

"It is quite natural for you to think of that, my dear! It was just as much your father's fault as your mother's, and Aunt Abby knew that, but—well, Aunt Abby is very much of a Rodney and has always been apt to think that——"

She paused, and Isabel looked up with a gleam of fun in her eyes. "I know, Aunt Phœbe! A Rodney can do no wrong!"

"Exactly."

"That ought to work two ways, then, oughtn't it?"

"How do you mean, dear?"

"I'm a Rodney, too! But — but — Aunt Abby——"

Her two aunts laughed. "Wait and see," said Aunt Lyd. "But now I think we had better leave Aunt Phœbe, for you have heard the whole story."

"Yes, I will let you go now, but I'm glad to have been the one to tell you," said Miss Phœbe. "I have felt for a long time that you ought to know it. I

THE SECRET STAIRS

just want to emphasize one thing, Isabel. You find it hard to blame your mother and father, for you are so much like them both you are able to make allowances. Now you must make some allowance, too, for your Aunt Abby, who is so entirely unlike them. She is not quick in her impulses, on the contrary she is slow. She was always so devoted to your Uncle Charles that she, for many years, found it difficult to forgive *either* of your parents. She was really as deeply offended with your father as with your mother. Since that day when your mother left the house by way of the secret stairs she has had a curious dislike for them. Remember that, when you are talking with her this morning. That is why I wanted to tell you this story before you should see her. But, my dear, your Aunt Abby is a very good woman! She forgave them both long ago. Of course, your coming revived the old grief and resentment, but she is becoming more and more fond of you, Isabel. Now run along, dear, and don't keep her waiting. I heard the front door shut a minute ago."

Aunt Lyd drew Isabel's arm through hers, and together they went downstairs. As they passed the hall clock its hands pointed to half past ten, and Miss Rodney, pleased with her niece's punctuality, opened the interview with great good humor. Her walk in the keen, frosty air, and her discovery at market that the price of eggs was distinctly reduced,

PEGGY AND MARY TO THE RESCUE

had cheered her considerably, and it was with a pleasant smile that she pointed out to Isabel the seat that she was to take near her own, an old-fashioned ottoman with a cover of worsted work that had been carefully stitched by some bygone Rodney.

"Now," said she, "tell us all about it. Of course, we realized how tired you were last night and were willing to wait. Why did you go to Boston in that extraordinary manner?"

There was a moment of silence. Then, her face grown suddenly pale, Isabel answered: "I'm sorry, Aunt Abby! Indeed, I'm dreadfully sorry, but—I—just—can't explain anything!" She had decided in the waking hours of the night that her only course was to refuse to answer any question. And then, just as Aunt Abby, recovering from the astonishment into which she had been thrown by this strange and hitherto unheard-of declaration of independence by a girl of fourteen, began to speak—at that very minute the door in the back hall that led to the garden was flung open, and Peggy's voice was heard.

"May we come in, Aunt Abby?" she called out. "Mary is here, too, and we want to tell you something."

Miss Rodney looked annoyed, and her voice expressed her feeling. "Not now, Peggy, if you please! I am very much engaged. If it is important, I will see you later in the day."

THE SECRET STAIRS

"Oh, but now is the time, Aunt Abby!" said Peggy, appearing in the doorway and apparently quite undaunted. "Mary wants to tell you something about—but come along in, Mary! When Aunt Abby hears what you have to tell her, she'll forgive you for interrupting her. You see if she doesn't!"

Isabel, from the ottoman, which seemed to her like a stool of penitence which she had read of, looked eagerly at her two friends. What had she told Mary last night? She could remember nothing, except that she had tried to be careful.

"This is very extraordinary!" exclaimed Miss Rodney. "Why should Mary know more than we do ourselves? Did Isabel tell you anything, Mary? Do you know why she went to Boston?"

"Not exactly, Miss Rodney, but I guessed something, and I have a perfect right to tell you, for Isabel didn't really tell me. I just guessed it. I saw in the train that she was dreadfully unhappy. She said she had promised somebody that she wouldn't tell any of her family where she had been. It was some one she knew and didn't like. She said she had never liked this person. It was a man, for she said 'him,' and she said that she couldn't break her promise, because the person, whoever it was, had made a sort of bargain with her and had told her how to get to the station only on condition that she would

PEGGY AND MARY TO THE RESCUE

not say who it was. She said she got a letter when she came home from school."

"She said very much the same thing to me this morning," put in Peggy, unable to keep silent any longer. "She said to me, 'I can't tell you. I only wish I could, but I promised,' and when I asked her whom she had promised she stammered and stuttered and at last she sputtered out, 'My—her——' or something like that. It gave me an idea, and when I heard she had been with Mary last night I made up my mind to rush over and get Mary, and we would put our two heads together and see what could be done, for we both have absolute faith in Isabel and we *know* she would rather explain to you than not do it, and it must be because she is tied up somehow. I knew she had a letter of some kind yesterday when we got home from school, for I saw the postman give her one, and we have a theory about it, and we both agree—and Mary can tell you what it is!" she added magnanimously.

"What is your theory, Mary?" asked Miss Rodney.

"Why, only this, Miss Abby, and you may think it awfully far-fetched, but Peggy and I think that—that—perhaps Isabel's other aunt may have been in Boston yesterday, and sent for her to come to see her. She spoke of her 'aunt' somebody, and stopped herself before she said the name."

THE SECRET STAIRS

They all noticed Isabel's start of surprise. They all heard her quickly-suppressed exclamation. Miss Rodney glanced at her sharply.

"I appreciate what you say, Mary," she said at last, "but although I should like to believe you are right, I don't see how we can if we use our common sense. Isabel's aunt, Mrs.—I have forgotten her present name—Mrs. Todd that was, *has gone to Spain!* She could not possibly be in Boston!"

She paused, with the air of having completely proved her point. To her utter amazement, and equally to the surprise of every one present, Miss Lydia drew from her pocket a folded bit of paper.

"I think the girls' theory is the truth, Abby," she said quietly. "I have been keeping this to show you when the time came, and it seems to me it has come. I picked this up last night on the secret stairs. It is part of an envelope, you see. Isabel, isn't this your Aunt Clara's handwriting?"

"Yes, Aunt Lyd!" The girl's voice was scarcely audible.

"Is this envelope the one you received yesterday?"

"Yes, it is."

"You see, Abby, that the part of the postmark that is left is surely part of the Boston mark. I think we can take it for a fact, that Isabel's aunt was in Boston yesterday, and sent for her to come to see her, and bound her to secrecy."

PEGGY AND MARY TO THE RESCUE

Miss Rodney sat up very straight. Her indignation lent fire to her words, but she was no longer indignant with Isabel. "Lydia, I believe you are right, although why there should have been such an extraordinary mystery about it I cannot imagine. However, it would be just like that—that person—to insist upon Isabel's keeping it a secret, and just like Isabel to keep her word! Isabel is a true Rodney in many ways. My dear, now we understand, thanks to the prompt action of Peggy and Mary! But, my dear, just tell me one thing if you can—I mean if your New England conscience—I am thankful you have one!—will allow you to do so. Has your aunt—that is—does she intend to remain in this country after all?"

"No, Aunt Abby. She leaves Boston to-day. She sails from there. She is never coming back."

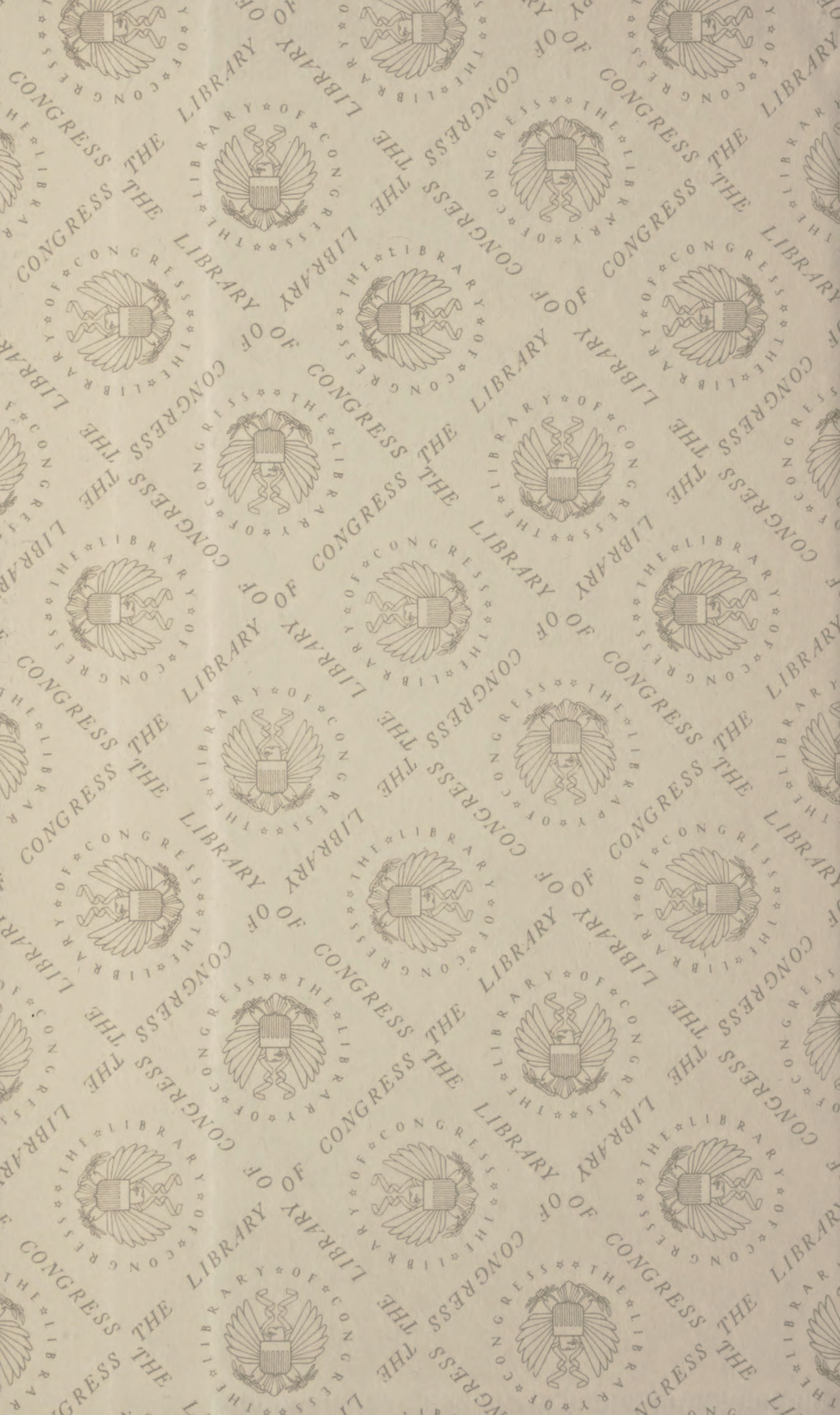
Miss Rodney drew a deep sigh of satisfaction and relief. "Oh, I am thankful!" she exclaimed. "From now on we can look upon you as wholly our own!"

THE END

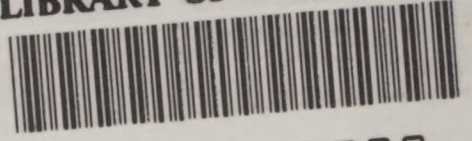
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